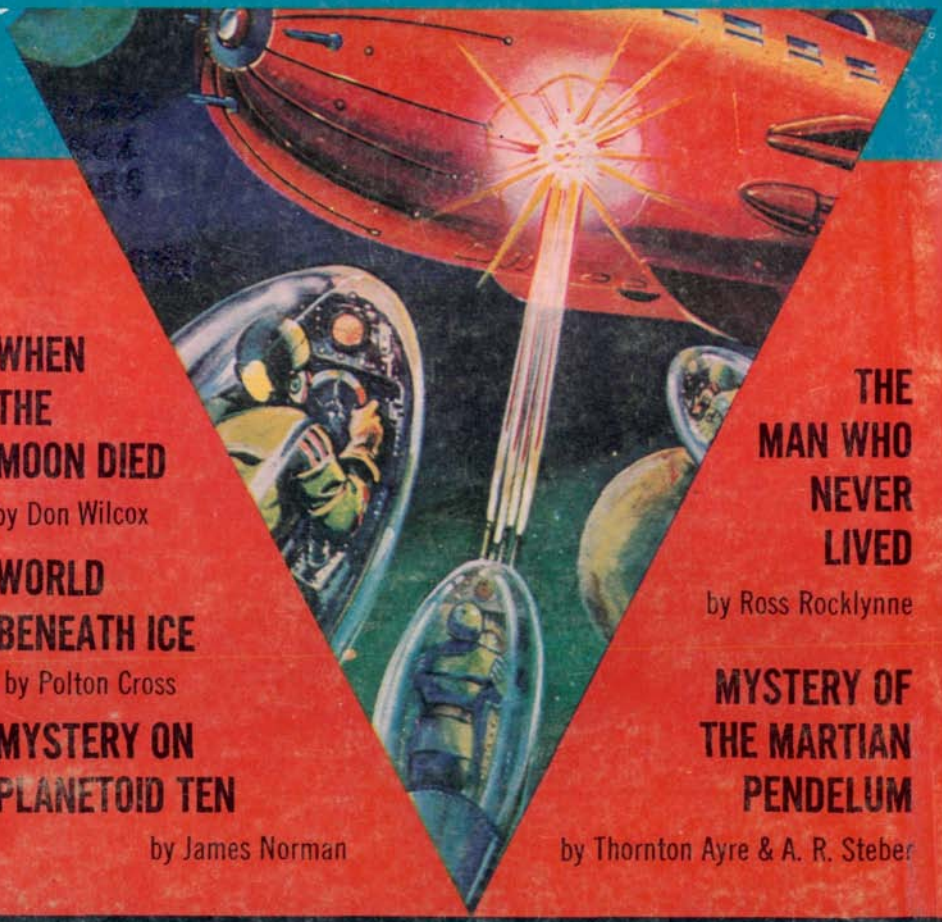
IMAGINATIVE TALES ON OTHER PLANETS

SPACE ADVENTURES

BIG NEW COLLECTION

NO. 9 • WINTER 1970 • ICD 50¢

(Classics)



WHEN THE MOON DIED
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THE MAN WHO NEVER LIVED
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by Thornton Ayre & A. R. Steber

SUICIDE SQUADRONS OF SPACE by David Wright O'Brien

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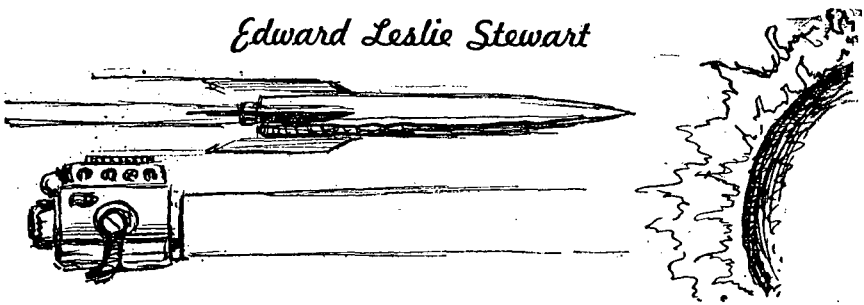
STAR SHIP CENTAURI

Edward Leslie Stewart



IT IS AWFULLY dangerous to handicap predictions of future science by using today's standards. Nevertheless, some standards must be used; as a consequence, today it is generally agreed that, for the most part, the stars will remain barred to human visitation except for a very few which seem attainable.

A hundred years from now men are going to look toward the stars. By then it is almost a certainty that the Solar System will have been thoroughly investigated. The planets will have been visited, some colonized, and adventurous men are going to want to reach out of the System.

Unfortunately their choice is going to be small. It is well known that the nearest star is Alpha Centauri. There is also the star Wolf, not much farther away. But both of these bodies are better than four *light years* away! How will it be possible to reach them?

If it takes light four years to reach these systems, how can rocketry hope to attain these stars in a human lifetime? This knotty problem doesn't admit of an easy solution. It seems a truism that the limitation on speed described by the Einstein Theory cannot be violated. Material bodies cannot exceed the velocity of light, 186,000 miles per second. In fact, gross material bodies such as rocket ships will have to restrict themselves to a fraction of this velocity. In addition, this velocity will have to be attained by a moderate acceleration. All of these things indicate that a trip to the nearest star will take a great deal longer than four years.

Any hypothetical trip might consume almost a lifetime, including the return, assuming motors of limitless power. The whole idea of the trip does not appear very attractive in this light. Still there are going to be adventurous people who will undertake it, no matter how long it will last.

There is always the possibility, of course, that some new principle in science will be discovered which will negate the Einsteinian velocity limitation. Stellar trips might become simple. The chances however, are against this. Just as quantum theory seems to indicate a limitation on what man can know of the atom, so the velocity limitation seems to preclude what men may know of the stellar system—except insofar as they are prepared to build what might amount to a "traveling planet" a self-contained rocket ship of huge size with an ecological system all its own, comparable to a regular planet. This idea is not beyond the realm of possibility at all. Enough science-fiction stories have considered the idea!

Whatever results, we do know that Man will reach the stars once the Solar System is conquered. The trip may be long and tedious but some day a sliver of metal is going to circle a sun whose remoteness startles us. You can't keep good men in the System!

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"SUICIDE SQUADRONS OF SPACE"

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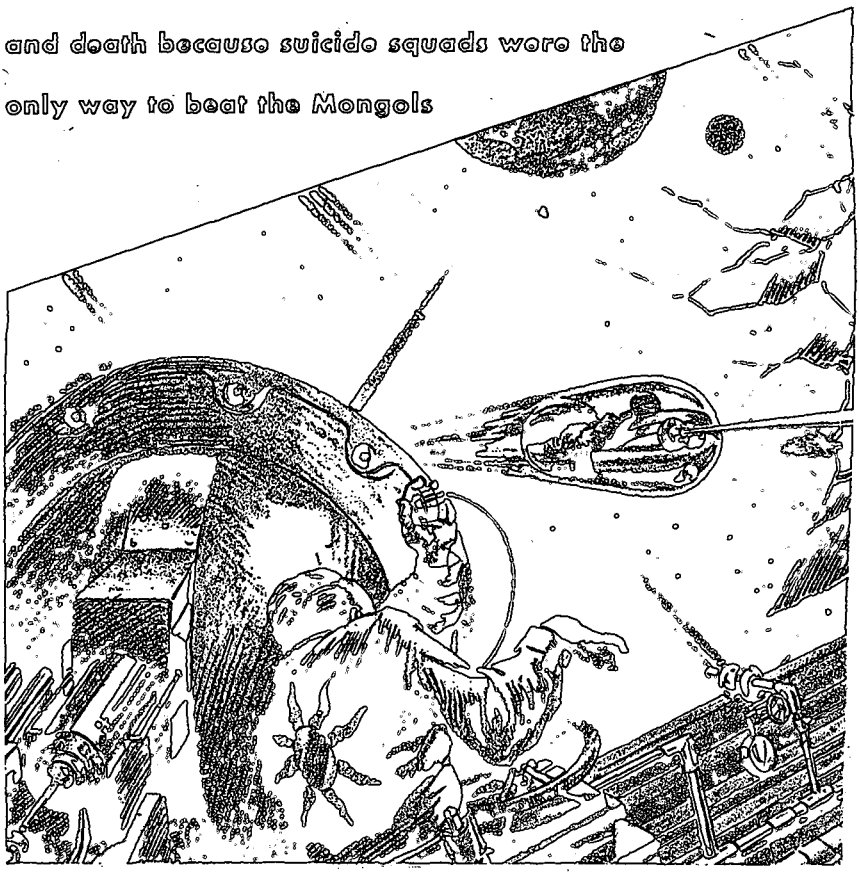
SUICIDE SQUADRONS OF SPACE

by David Wright O'Brien

Craig Starko couldn't stand between his kid brother and death because suicide squads were the only way to beat the Mongols



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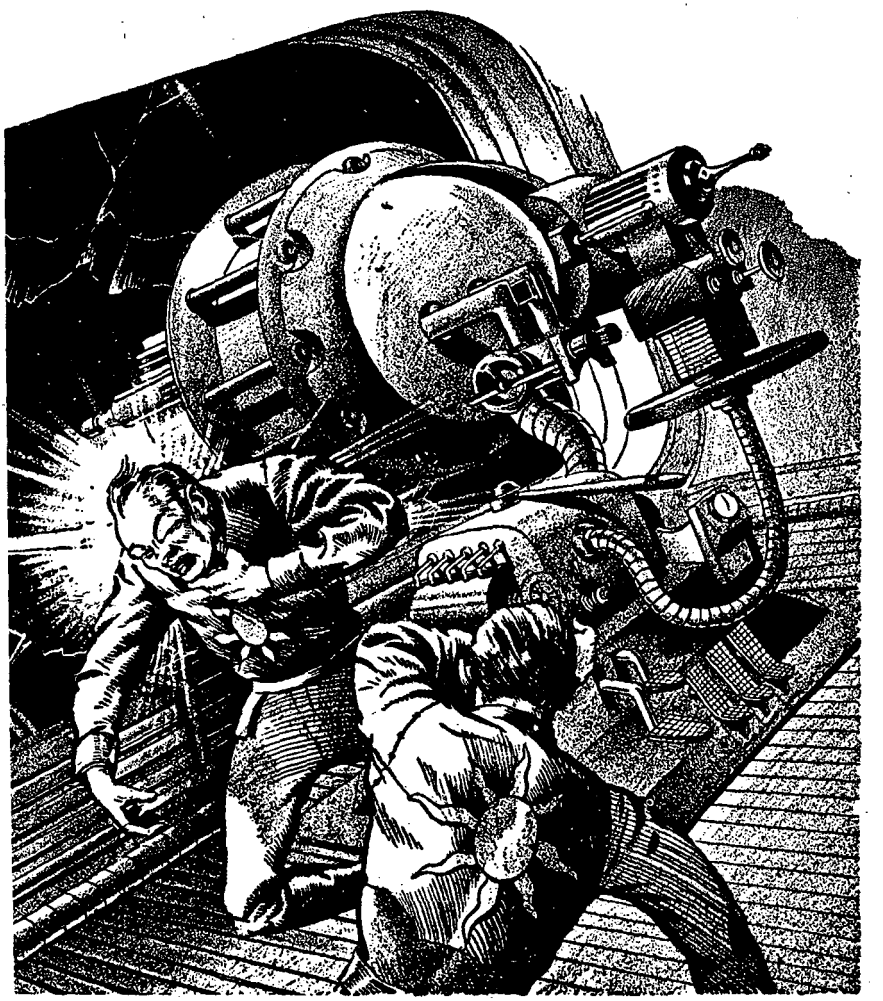
"I SUPPOSE," said the flight commander, "that you officers are the replacements I asked for."

Then he thought to himself: "Why in hell does War College insist on sending these punks up to the front? The poor kids are just babies. Fresh and eager, with no idea in the world of what they're getting in for. They probably think war in space is a glorious adventure."

For a moment the tall, lean-muscled flight commander stood silently behind his desk, his tired gray eyes moving in restless appraisal over the four uniformed young men standing at rigid attention before him. With a gesture of infinite weariness, he rubbed a strong



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brown hand across the bronzed and hardened lines of his still youthful features.

"I suppose, too, that your instructors at War College recommended you all very highly."

Noticing the flush of embarrassment that crossed the faces of the young officers, the flight commander softened his tone.

"There was no contempt intended in my statement, gentlemen. I was merely thinking of my own days in War College. That wasn't so long ago, y'know."

Again the flight commander thought to himself:

"No, that wasn't so long ago. Just ten years. I was a punk then, too. The Fourth World War* was in its fortieth year, then. Now it's been going on for fifty years. I'm only thirty years old, and I feel like a hundred."

Suddenly the flight commander broke off his thoughts abruptly. For the first time, he noticed that there were only four of the young replacement officers standing before him.

"Where is your other fellow officer?" he asked a blond, smooth-cheeked lad standing nearest to him. "There were supposed to be five replacements, not four."

The pink-skinned youth spoke promptly.

"Commander Walters detained him, sir. He is to join us shortly."

The flight commander nodded. "I see. Well, let's get down to introductions, gentlemen. As you all know, my name is Starke, Flight Commander Craig Starke. I'll be in charge while we're all together." He paused. "Sound off your own names, gentlemen."

"Chanes, sir," said the young officer who had spoken a moment before. Then, in succession, the other three junior officers gave their names, eagerly and with pride.

Flight Commander Starke smiled for the first time since the replacements stepped into his office.

"Very well, gentlemen. I'm more than certain we'll get along splendidly. Return to your quarters. I'll expect you all out at assembly in the morning. Never forget, we're fighting a war!"

The replacements were pushing out through the door when Craig Starke spoke again.

"By the way, Chanes, what is the name of the fifth officer?"

Chanes appeared slightly embarrassed.

"Lieutenant Dick Starke, sir. Your brother!" Then he was gone.

Craig Starke sank slowly back in his swivel-chair, an expression of mingled anger, amazement and shock crossing his features. He ran his hand through his lank black hair, and the line of his jaw slowly hardened, set.

For fully five minutes he remained as he was, staring at the door. His brother, Dick. He hadn't seen Dick in ten years; no, twelve. Dick was a young, blond, smiling kid, gray-eyed and stocky—almost the opposite of his elder brother—when he'd seen him last. Dick was going to be a doctor. Had said so, dedicated his youth to it.

CRAIG STARKE, pleased that the kid wasn't going to carry on the family's hidebound Army tradition, had financed that medical education. Four times a year, for the past eleven years, Dick had written him, had spoken eagerly of his medical training. But in-

*The Fourth World War started in the year 2500—the 26th century—with the United States against the Mongol hordes, who had conquered all of Earth except this country. In their onward sweep of conquest, the yellow legions had seized the interplanetary colonies of all nations except Space Base 10, a U. S. possession, where the action in this story takes place. The Asiatic hordes are being led by Kama Khan, a direct descendant of his famous forerunner, Genghis Khan.—Ed.

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stead, he had gone to War College—and was now assigned to Space Base 10 under his elder brother's command.

Burning rage replaced all other of Craig Starke's emotions, and his big brown hands squeezed hard on the edge of his desk. Dick, the kid he'd been so blastedly proud of, had betrayed him!

Several moments must have passed before Flight Commander Starke heard the knocking on his door. Setting his jaw grimly, he forced himself to keep his voice steady.

"Come in," he barked.

And Lieutenant Dick Starke stepped into the room.

"Craig!" There was joy as well as embarrassment in the younger officer's voice. "Dammit, it's grand to see you, Craig!"

Craig Starke stared frostily at his brother, unconsciously noting the changes in the kid. He was a little taller now, still shorter than Craig though, and was even wider, more muscular than before. His hair hadn't darkened. In fact it was almost a white-blond now. The grin that had jumped so eagerly to his face was now sliding sickly away as Dick noted the expression in his brother's eyes.

"You're sore, Craig. Sore as hell. But I can expl—"

"Lieutenant Starke?" His brother's voice broke in sharply, giving the other no time to finish. "Lieutenant Starke," he repeated, letting the icy formality of the tone sink in, "you are with the new replacement officers, I believe."

"Look, Craig," his younger brother started again, a sort of desperation in his voice.

"It is customary, Lieutenant Starke," the other went on, "to address your superior officers by title." His voice became heavy with sarcasm. "I suppose your instructors at War College taught you as much."

Lieutenant Dick Starke snapped rigidly to attention, his eyes the only remaining indication of the emotion that filled him.

"As I was saying," Craig Starke grated, "you are with the new replacement officers. All of you are new to the front, new to war of any sort other than the bosh they hand you in school. This is space war, Lieutenant. In case you're not aware of it—it's sheer unadulterated hell up here. The invaders play for keeps, and kill to stay killed."

He paused, seemingly calmer, but his big hands still gripped the edges of his desk fiercely.

"You are also a bit worn out by your journey from Earth, I presume. Go to the quarters I have assigned the others. That's all!"

Lieutenant Dick Starke seemed to hesitate for a moment, debating against the rage of his brother and the futility of his own explanations. Then he did a smart about-face, after saluting, and was gone.

For endless seconds after his brother had left him, Craig Starke sat leaning back in his swivel-chair, staring blankly at the paneled pattern of the ceiling. At last, aloud, he said:

"So he wants to play soldier, eh? Wants to kill rather than heal. Well, dammit, he won't play soldier under *my* command! I'll get him out of here faster than a rocket charge!"

ONCE more in his rôle of flight commander, Starke leaned forward, flicking the switch on the televisor box that sat on his desk. There was a static spluttering, then the white screen glowed orange, finally pale gray, rugged features taking form on it.

Craig Starke looked at the face of the Base senior officer, old "Iron" Walters. The venerable Army officer's profile was seamed with the brown ruts

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that only space war can sear into a man, and his thick white drooping mustache bobbed as he spoke.

"Well, Starke?"

"Wanted to talk to you, sir," Starke replied. "It's about my brother, just arrived with the new replacements. I want him transferred out of here, immediately!"

"Why?" There was amazement in the senior officer's voice, on his stony features.

"He doesn't belong here," Craig Starke insisted. "It's not right that he should serve under me. The other officers will think—"

"To hell with what the other officers think! They shan't have a chance to think of anything. I was the one who had your brother Richard assigned here. Thought it would surprise and please you, don't y'know."

The older officer's face beamed pontifically out of the televisor box.

"Didn't suspect he was at War College, eh?" Senior Officer Walters winked slyly. "Knew it would please you, however. Both my daughter and I were sure that it would be stupid for a Starke to become a sawbones. Not in the breed. Too many Starkes have been damned fine soldiers, to have one go to pot as a medico. Knew he belonged in the Army. We convinced him, daughter and I. See you at mess."

The box spluttered once again, then paled, the vision of the venerable officer's face fading away.

Flight Commander Craig Starke rose to his feet, cursing. So that was the way the wind blew! The damned meddling old fossil had been the cause of Dick's deserting the medical profession. Commander Walters was so filled with the Army he couldn't see anything else. And his daught—

Starke stopped short. That was it. She was the cause of it! Old Iron Walters would never have lured Dick away from medicine, but his pretty daughter, Bea, could wrap Dick around her little finger.

Craig Starke suddenly remembered at least ten mentions of the girl's name in his brother's letters to him. So Dick had fallen for Bea, and she had talked him into the change. And Bea Walters, daughter of the Base commander, was here with her father. It all added up perfectly!

Flight Commander Craig Starke seized his uniform cap, slammed it on the back of his head, and stalked out of his office. He knew, as he strode angrily past the space ship hangars and on through the officers' dining room, toward Officers' Row, that he was going to have it out with Miss Bea Walters.

CHAPTER II

Catastrophe

WHEN Lieutenant Dick Starke arrived at Officers' Quarters, he found that his room had already been arranged for by young Chanes. The two of them were to share the same place. Chanes was sprawled comfortably out on the cot by the window, smoking a cigarette and turning his head occasionally to watch the mechanics working over the space combat ships at the far end of the hangars.

Wordlessly, Dick threw his luggage beneath his own cot and proceeded to remove his military dress tunic. Then he sat down on the cot occupied by Chanes, letting his head rest in his hands.

"Didn't work out so well, eh, Dick?" Chanes observed sympathetically. "Five will get you ten that he wouldn't even let you explain."

"No," the younger Starke said dis-

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mally. "He wouldn't give me the chance to say a word."

Chanes was thoughtful, rubbing his jaw in mute contemplation.

"If you don't mind my saying so, he's a helluva tough baby—even for a flight commander."

Dick shrugged. "He's been up here ten years, don't forget."

"Yeah," Chanes replied. "I guess ten years at the front can process any given material into steel." He proffered a pack of smokes to Dick. "Have one."

There was a minute of silence, as young Starke lighted his cigarette, broken at length by Chanes' next remark.

"Seen Bea Walters yet?"

At the mention of the name, Dick Starke seemed to brighten perceptibly.

"No," he answered. "But I'll get a chance to see her after mess this evening."

Chanes smiled. "I envy you, fella. Not only have you got one of the swellest-looking *femmes* in the cosmos, but you're lucky enough to have her as the daughter of an Army commander, living with her daddy at the same Base you're stationed at."

Dick Starke disregarded the levity in his companion's tones, frowning as he answered,

"I don't know, Chanes. Bea's being up here at the front with her dad worries me. I don't like it. Supposing the invaders get wind of the Base location and come over to sprinkle their radium bombs on us. This isn't exactly a safe place for a woman."

"Old Iron Walters isn't going to let his daughter stay around, if there's even the remotest chance that such a thing might happen," Chanes assured him. "No, I imagine we're pretty damned safe from the invaders. It'll be a long time before they locate this base. We're so well hidden that—"

Chanes broke off abruptly. His gesturing hand paused in mid-air, and he looked sharply, quizzically at his new roommate.

"What's that?" he demanded.

Dick Starke stared at him. "What's that?"

Chanes' forehead was wrinkled, and excitement tinged his face.

"Listen," he repeated. "Can't you hear it? Atomic motors overhead! Lots of them, from the sound. I think—"

The rest of his sentence was drowned in the wail of raid sirens, dismally screeching out their warnings of death and danger above. Chanes and Dick Starke were on their feet instantly, grabbing tunics and dashing for the door.

"An attack!" Dick shouted. "The invaders are above the Base!"

"Wow!" shouted Chanes. "Action at last!"

THE two young officers were already dashing down the long barracks corridor. Other doors along the hall were flying open, and more figures emerged in hurried excitement. There was an increasing babble of voices, and through the same amplifier that had sounded the siren warnings, there came the staccato piping of a bugle.

"Assembly, before the hangars," Chanes gasped into Dick's ear. "Hot damn, we're going up after 'em!"

Most of the flight officers were already lined up before the space ship hangars when Dick and Chanes arrived. Dick saw that his brother was already on the scene, moving quietly up and down the line, issuing orders to men and mechanics. Hangar turrets were rolling up, and bullet-nosed, sleek-lined space combat ships were being rolled forth.

As Flight Commander Craig Starke

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went down the line of officers, speaking to all in turn, each man fell out of line and made for the combat rockets assigned to him. Dick and Chanes had joined the line at the far end. Finally, however, Starke was before them. He was calm, cool, and might have been lecturing a student group for all his manner.

"Chanes," he said softly. "You'll report to the commandant's office with Starke and the other replacements who arrived today. I'm not sending any of you up on this flight. You haven't had time to adjust yourselves to our conditions yet."

Enthusiasm drained from the faces of the two younger officers like water from a leaky bucket. Disappointment was clearly written in their every expression.

Dully then the pair fell out of line and began trotting in the direction of the commandant's office. Neither spoke, each was too full of his own bitterness. They were lost to the furor around them.

Then the first radium bomb fell.

It came with a singing, screaming, tearing impact, landing far to the left of the hangars. The detonation was terrific, hurling both Dick and Chanes to the ground, spreading orange flame in every direction.

Dick's ears rang deafeningly, and blood trickled slowly from the corners of his nose and mouth. Somewhere, the scream of a man in horrible agony drifted past. The raid siren was wailing once more. An Emergency Squad Unit passed by, ten men bearing stretchers and apparatus. Chanes was on his feet again, and Dick regained his.

Now the atomic motors of the Base's own combat ships were sputtering angrily, and the reverberations of their engines smashed the air as they climbed spaceward. One after another, the sleek combat space ships left the ground; streaks that zipped, became dwarfed, then vanished into the fog of the upper strata.

Dick and Chanes were running again, heedless of the confusion and terror surrounding them. By now four more radium bombs had scored hits somewhere on the Base. Most of the combat ships, however, were off the ground by now. Not many more bombs would land before the huge space battleships of the invaders would be driven off.

At last the two young officers were before the quarters of old Iron Walters. Dick was up the steps in a bound, through the door, with Chanes at his heels. The room they entered was half-filled with wives and children of other officers. In charge were the other three replacement officers who had arrived that day. Wildly Dick's eyes searched the room for a sign of Bea Walters.

THEN he saw her. She was in the far corner of the spacious room, her back turned to him. Several of the officers' wives were grouped around her, and Dick saw that she was crying, for her slim shoulders shook with sobs and her lovely blond head was bent.

He was across the room in an instant and at her side.

"Bea," he found his voice sounding strange in his ears, husky. "Bea, darling. What's wrong?"

A short plump woman, one of the officers' wives, turned to him soberly.

"Her father," she said. "Commander Walters was killed by one of the first bombs."

Dick's features hardened as he mentally cursed the terror of the invaders, then softened as he looked at Bea.

"Brace up, honey," he half whispered. "The old fellow was a soldier. No tears. He wouldn't have wanted to go any other way than in battle."

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Bea Walters' sobbing quieted, and she wiped away the tears from her large brown eyes.

"Sorry, Dick. I didn't think of it that way. I suppose you're right. I shouldn't carry on like this."

Dick gripped her arm warmly. "That's the way," he encouraged.

Then he looked about the large room. There were others, from the sound of things, who had lost much in the fury of the invaders' attack.

"Maybe we can be of some use to the rest," he added.

And at that moment Dick realized that the sound of steady bomb explosions had ceased as abruptly as the raid had begun. But for the faint, far-off whine of the ships in space above them, all was now deathly quiet.

Chanes had followed on Dick's heels.

"The invaders," he said. "They've been driven off."

A uniformed dispatch carrier worked his way through the throng. His eyes searched the group, looking for an officer. He spied Dick and was beside him in a moment.

"A message," he blurted. "The strata-telegrapher picked it up on his space band three minutes ago. He said to relay it to an officer immediately, sir."

Dick nodded automatically, taking the message. The dispatch carrier saluted and was gone. While Bea and Chanes crowded close, Dick unfolded the communication. Simultaneously, an exclamation of startled horror broke from their lips. For the message read:

NEW YORK HAS FALLEN BENEATH A CONCERTED MONGOL DRIVE. KAMA KHAN'S HORDES SWEEPING WESTWARD ACROSS U. S., MEETING SLIGHT RESISTANCE. BATTLE WAGING FURIOUSLY ALONG ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT. PREPARE TO ABANDON SPACE BASE 10, OBJECT OF INVADERS' NEXT DRIVE.—GENERAL S. K. BLAINE, COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF U. S. ARMY FORCES ON EARTH.

"Good God," Dick muttered. "It looks like the end of things, if Blaine and his forces can't stop the Mongols at the Rockies."

"New York must have been attacked less than a week after we left War College to come up here," Chanes muttered incredulously.

Bea was white, lips tensed, saying nothing. Her lovely face portrayed mixed emotions of fear and rage. She was trembling slightly, from the shock of the past minutes.

"Abandon Space Base 10," Dick said bitterly. "For what? If Khan's forces sweep the United States, the last territory on Earth to hold out against the Mongols, where can we go? Space Base 10 is the only refuge we have here in the cosmos. Khan and his Mongol hordes have already conquered the other planets."

His jaw tightened, and he faced Bea and Chanes.

"Don't let word of this get out," he commanded. "It can't do any good, and might do irreparable harm. I'll give the message to Craig as soon as the combat squadron comes back."

CHAPTER III

New Orders

FLIGHT COMMANDER CRAIG STARKE sat at his desk, one hand wrapped around a pony of brandy, the other absent-mindedly loosening the collar of his military tunic. A cigarette hung almost forgotten from the corner of his handsome, somewhat cynical mouth. Starke was trying, as he had

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tried many times during the past ten years, to forget the memory of another afternoon's combat in space.

"Six more gone," he thought bitterly. "All of them pals. Burned to cinders in space. One of them might have been my brother."

And then, to drown the rage and futility that swelled in his throat, he gulped the remainder of his brandy in a swift gesture.

A moment later, Lieutenant Dick Starke stepped into the room.

"Well," Flight Commander Starke spat angrily. "You might knock, Lieutenant."

He glared at his brother, watching the youngster's eyes flick quickly, accusingly, to the glass he held in his hand.

"A message," Dick said quickly, "came in over the stratagraph less than fifteen minutes ago."

He held out a paper in his hand. And while his brother unfolded the white sheet, Dick added,

"I also wanted to tell you that one of the invaders' bombs got Commander Walters. He's dead."

Starke looked up sharply, for an instant fighting against emotion. Then he was calm, apparently.

"I—I'm sorry." He ran a hand across his brow. "He was a great soldier, a gallant commander." Then his voice hardened. "But that's war, Lieutenant, the 'glamorous', 'glorious' adventure you've found for yourself." Then he turned his attention to the message.

As his brother read the message from General Blaine, Dick saw his face pale beneath its tan. Then the muscles of the lean jaw went tight, into hard small knots. At length he looked up.

"You've read this?" he asked.

Dick merely nodded. Starke went on, "With Walters dead, that means that I'm shouldered with command of the entire Base. There was one thing Blaine didn't know when he sent this message—the Mongol invaders have already drawn a steel ring around Space Base 10. We found that out this afternoon, when we went up to drive their bombers away from the strata-lines. We've no chance of breaking through them. Not now—inasmuch as we're unable to get help from Earth any longer."

"But, New York—I never thought they'd take New York," Dick blurted.

"No. None of us imagined they would. But they have. And now we're ringed in up here. It looks like the end."

There was an awkward silence. "Isn't there a chance of breaking through?" Dick flushed at his brother's hard stare. "I mean, can't some of us—volunteers, for example—take a crack at breaking through the ring around Base 10?"

"Your ideas," Craig Starke observed acidly, "are as foolish as they are melodramatic, Lieutenant. Tactical plans lie in my authority, not the authority of a junior officer. Please remember that. Good day, Lieutenant!"

Crimson, Dick wheeled and stamped out of the room. There was a strange light in his brother's eyes as he watched him leave, a light that betrayed something of grudging admiration.

AN orderly entered a moment later. "This letter, sir," he said, "was addressed to you by Commander Walters. He ordered it delivered to you—in case anything happened to him."

He saluted and closed the door. Starke opened the letter.

Dear Starke:

If you receive this message, it will be because I am no longer with you. As my second in command, you will have taken over responsibility for the Base. There were

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certain letters from the War Department, which you will find in my wall safe, that you never knew about. They concern emergency orders issued to me less than six months ago—vital information that I was not permitted to pass on even to you. If it becomes necessary to rely on these emergency instructions, for God's sake do so.

It was signed simply "Walters."

Starke rose, buttoning the throat of his tunic. He'd have to get those instructions.

Bea Walters met him at the door of the late commander's quarters. She was dressed in a dark dress that accentuated the lovely blondness of her hair, the delicate lines of her oval features. Her eyes showed she had been crying.

"Come in, Craig."

For a moment he stood awkwardly in the hallway, twisting his uniform cap in his hands, wishing that he could properly phrase the words that he felt inside him. The best he could do was,

"Sorry, Bea. Sorry as the devil. We all are. You know that."

"Yes, Craig," she said simply. "I—I understand."

Then he told her of her father's message, of the papers he was supposed to take from the safe. She nodded in acquiescence and he followed her through the living room.

In the study where her father had kept most of his effects, Bea closed the door and walked to a picture on the wall. She pushed this back, revealing a safe. After a moment she had opened it.

"Take whatever is necessary, Craig," she said.

He found the envelopes, big and bulky, with the official stamp of the War Department on them.

"These are all I'll be needing, Bea."

She closed the safe then, and the two of them walked in silence back to the living room.

"Wait, Craig." Bea spoke the words softly, yet quickly. He turned to face her.

"I wanted to talk to you," Bea went on, "about Dick." Her eyes indicated that she was aware of the sudden mask that slipped over his features. "Please, Craig," she said. "You must listen to me."

"Well?" Starke spoke brusquely, huskily.

"I asked him to quit his medical studies, Craig. I had father get him assigned to this Base."

"I'd figured as much," Starke told her.

"I'm sorry now, Craig," Bea said softly. "I never knew what I was getting him into until today."

STARKE said sharply, "It doesn't really matter any longer. Good day."

Then he was trotting briskly down the steps of the house, and out onto the hangar field. Darkness was closing in on Base 10 by the time he reached his office once more. Entering, he snapped on the light, slid the catch to the door, and walked over to his desk.

Methodically, he slit open the envelopes he'd taken from the wall safe, arranging them on his desk. He moved across to his cabinet, returned with a decanter of brandy, cigarettes and a small glass. Then he loosened the collar on his tunic and got down to intensive study. These were Craig Starke's emergency instructions. And the emergency was now at hand.

CHAPTER IV

Suicide Squadron

FIVE hours later, Starke was still in his office. The papers from the War Department had long since been digested, and were now reposing once

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more in the breast pocket of his tunic. The decanter of brandy was half empty, and the cigarette tray on his desk was heaped with stubs.

He pondered Commander Walters' instructions about the shipment that had come from Earth six weeks before—a War Department consignment, the labels on the boxes had said.

They were still in the old arsenal, those crates, guarded day and night—though Walters had been the only man who knew what they contained. And now it was Starke's job to bring those crates forth and order their contents assembled. For those crates contained space ships.

Moving in sudden decision, Starke strode over to his desk, snapped on the televisor box. In a moment the face of the communications orderly focused on the screen.

"Yes, sir?" said the orderly, hastily turning his head to face his superior, stuffing a news bulletin out of sight.

"Tell all flight officers, junior and senior, to report here in my office immediately," Starke directed.

Half an hour later, facing the assembled flight officers of Base 10, Craig Starke said:

"I called you men to my office to inform you officially that I have taken over the command vacated by the death of Commander Walters."

Someone coughed nervously in the silence that followed.

"Also," Starke continued, fingers restlessly toying with the letter opener on his desk, "I have several important matters to discuss with you gentlemen. The first being," he reached into his drawer to produce the message his brother had given him earlier in the day, "a stratagraph message from General Blaine, ordering the immediate evacuation of Space Base 10."

Starke paused to light a cigarette. "You men who went up with me this afternoon, to drive off the bombing attack of our enemy, are all aware that Base 10 has been thoroughly surrounded by enemy squadrons." There was a murmur among the officers.

"I sent scout patrols out into space immediately after we drove off the bombers. These patrols returned with information concerning the strength and position of the enemy."

Starke nodded at a stocky, red-haired little officer.

"Captain Shay, here, has the report of the scouting patrol. Please read it, Captain."

Shay cleared his throat self-consciously, unfolding a chart which he'd been holding in his hand.

"Base 10, as far as can be ascertained," he began, "is completely surrounded by four enemy space squadrons. These squadrons comprise four flotillas totaling eight space battleships, which are patrolling our first Base defense line. In addition, the enemy has a roving squadron of ten cruiser-type space boats, three space ship carriers, and an aggregate of twenty of the smaller combat type space ships.

"This is a total unit strength of forty-one ships capable of independent battle action. The range patrolled by the enemy is the equivalent of our entire border area."

THERE was a moment of suspended silence.

"That," Craig Starke remarked dryly, "is the situation which we face, gentlemen. Briefly, it amounts to this: With our fighting strength at present status, the odds of our combat ships breaking through the ring are roughly —five hundred to one."

He stared for a moment at the tensed faces of his men. Then he went on.

"We have enough supplies on Base 10

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to last us for several months. As it stands, the invaders haven't enough strength to take the Base from us. We can hold them off until our supplies run out. But after that—" He broke off, spreading his hands in an expressive gesture.

Looking speculatively across the faces of his officers, Starke debated swiftly the best manner of approaching the reason for this meeting. He caught his brother, in the rear of the group, whispering excitedly to the rosy-cheeked Chanes, who stood beside him. That gave Starke his cue. He said,

"One of our recently arrived replacement officers made a suggestion this afternoon—a suggestion that carried more weight than he imagined. He made mention of a volunteer squadron. That, gentlemen, is precisely what we shall have to count on to break the ring that encircles us."

"But at five hundred to one!" Captain Shay had stepped forward again. "It's madness to think of such a venture, Commander!"

Starke smiled, but without humor. "Five hundred to one, yes. But those are odds based on our present combat fighting equipment. I am speaking of equipment which you men know nothing about. Equipment which arrived at the Base here secretly less than six weeks ago, and which is now stored in the old arsenal."

There was a gasp of surprise from the officers assembled. Starke held up his hand for silence.

"Yes, that's correct. The War Department, expecting some such emergency, sent a special shipment of five hundred large crates—supposedly extra parts for our present space ships—which contain forty unassembled 'mystery' space ships. They are a type that have never been used in this war before. In the Government's files they are referred to as 'suicide ships.' They are single-seater space fighters."

The first gasp of astonishment was nothing compared to the comment aroused by Commander Starke's last sentence. Chanes spoke the amazement of all when he repeated incredulously,

"*Single*-seaters?"

Starke nodded briskly. "That's right. Forty-five of them, to repeat myself. All of them are equipped for one single purpose—to wreak havoc among enemy squadrons. And—*they weren't constructed to return after their work was completed!*"

An officer, at least twenty years Starke's senior in service, stepped forward. His rugged features were perplexed.

"Commander Starke, might I remind you that you haven't given any reason, as yet, for such an attempt? What is to prevent us from asking aid from Earth? Surely, the most sensible strategy would be to wait for help!"

STARKE answered him calmly enough.

"You're quite within your rights in asking that question, Major Casey. But here is your answer. I was forced to hold this information back until now. New York has fallen before the forces of Kama Khan, and our armies have been driven back to the Rocky Mountain front!"

Above the excited bedlam of voices, Starke pounded his fist on the desk. For fully four minutes, however, the turmoil went on unabated. At length the room quieted, and he could be heard again.

"There, gentlemen, is the situation we must face. I needn't add that I'm counting on each one of you to stand by. If we play our hand closely, there's a chance that the majority of us will

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come out with whole skins. Report at the hangars directly after assembly tomorrow morning. I'll have had the mechanics working on the new ships by then, and all of you will have to become thoroughly acquainted with them. That's all. Dismissed!"

As he watched the last of his subalterns file out of his office and into the darkness of the parade ground, Craig Starke felt suddenly, sickeningly weary. The responsibility of leadership, carried for ten years of ceaseless effort at the front, had been doubled within the past twenty-four hours. And he felt this responsibility pressing down upon him mercilessly, relentlessly.

"I hope," he muttered with eyes half shut, "that I won't let old Walters down. I can't let any of them down. Whatever happens from now on is directly up to me!"

He walked dejectedly back to his desk, slumping down in his worn leather chair. Then he picked up a pen, scratched rapidly for a few moments, signed his name, and leaned back. In the morning, assembling of the suicide ships would get under way.

CHAPTER V

The Roll Call

EXCITEMENT ran high on Base 10 the next morning. The news of their plight was received by both Army and civilian residents of the Base with an attitude of quiet determination. Walking from Officers' Mess, Chanes commented on this to Dick Starke.

"Their chins are still up, thank God," Chanes said. "That's half the battle."

"If it weren't for the circumstances, you'd think that a holiday spirit had taken hold of the Base, eh?" Dick answered.

Chanes nodded. "They're all hanging around the arsenal, evidently waiting for the first of the new ships to be carted out."

"Single-seaters," Dick observed, half to himself. "I still don't get it. What chance in hell will such ships have against the enormous battlecraft of Kama Khan?"

"That," Chanes replied, "is what we have to find out. Let's get over there." The pair turned their steps toward the hangars.

Mechanics were assembling the new fighters before an interested audience of officers, privates and civilians when they arrived on the field. The first of the new ships was almost assembled, and Dick and Chanes had to elbow their way through the crowd before they could study the craft.

"Well, I'll be damned," Chanes gasped. "Look at that baby!"

Dick's jaw, too, had dropped open in surprise. The single-seater rocket fighter was incredibly small, approximately twelve feet in length, shaped almost like a space torpedo. The pilot's cockpit was just barely large enough to permit movement. Mounted at the nose of the craft were twin atomic mortar guns. On the sleek, steel stomach of the space fighter, there were releases for as many as six space bomb discharges.

The nose of the single-seater was what held Dick Starke's attention. It had been constructed to hold something inside its metal turret, but whatever that something was, it hadn't been installed as yet. Dick commented on this to Chanes.

"What do you suppose is going into the nose?"

Chanes looked at him sharply. "Didn't you know?" Then, smiling wryly, "Nitroglycerin compression fluid!"

"Huh!" Dick was jolted. "The

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damned thing not only carries every conceivable type of space weapon—it's a veritable bomb in itself!"

"Exactly."

They fell silent then, watching mechanics rapidly assemble the bomb carriages on the stomach of the tiny space fighter.

"It's funny," Chanes said softly. "Here we are, standing around watching the construction of our own coffins."

"Not necessarily," Dick said. "We don't know who's going to be assigned to them."

"Why," Chanes spread his hands, "it will be a question of volunteers, of course. What else?"

There was a strange sensation in the pit of Dick Starke's stomach. His hands felt moist, his throat dry. He wasn't afraid of death. And he knew, beyond all certainty, that he would be one of the first to volunteer. He knew, in other words, that his remaining hours of life were numbered. And, being young, he didn't want to die.

HE looked instinctively at Chanes. From the expression in the other's eyes, Dick saw that Chanes, too, was thinking along much the same lines. Dick grinned. Chanes smiled and squeezed his roommate's arm in mutual sympathy.

They turned then, these two young officers, and sauntered away from the hangars. Both of them were silent, each with his own thoughts. They didn't hear the first shout.

"Dick!" It was a girl's voice. "Dick!" They turned, to see Bea Walters running up behind them. She was still dressed in her somber black costume, but she was smiling now, and the blond loveliness of her hair crowned the perfection of her features.

"I heard," she said, "that there's going to be an attempt made to break through Kama Khan's squadron blockade."

The two young officers nodded mutely.

"This might be the turning point in the war," Bea went on. "Oh, I do hope that this new plan is successful. I understand that the invaders have the most important sections of their space squadrons waiting in the first strata. I—" She broke off abruptly at the expression in Dick's eyes, the expression he couldn't hide. "Why, Dick, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, honey," Dick said quickly, slipping an arm about her waist. Then he saw the look on Chanes' face. It said, plainly, "Better tell her, fella. She'll know sooner or later."

Dick bit his underlip. "I have to talk to you alone, Bea. There's something you ought to know." Then, to Chanes: "Do you mind?"

"Not a bit," his companion nodded. "I'll run on along; some things to attend to, anyway."

Wordlessly, Dick led Bea over to the deserted side of an old hangar.

"Dick," Bea said anxiously. "What is it? What's wrong? What's happened?"

"I might as well tell you, honey. It's about the flight, the attack that's planned to break the invaders' blockade around Base 10."

Pain came suddenly into the girl's eyes. "I know, Dick," she said. "It's going to be terribly dangerous. Space war always is. I ought to know. After all, father—"

She stopped, then went on quickly. "I know, at any rate, that the situation is more than most of us realize. I was only trying to be cheerful for your sake—to make you think that I was able to keep my chin up."

Suddenly hot little tears were running down the girl's cheeks. "Oh, Dick,

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Dick, I can't bear it any longer! It's all my fault. I brought you up here, through father, and now—" She buried her face against his chest.

Dick fought for control of himself, iron control that would enable him to tell her the truth. In a strained, husky voice, he heard himself saying,

"It isn't just war, this time. It's more than that, honey. I've got to tell you. You've got to know."

Bea had raised her head, and was looking at him from tear-stained eyes. Dick hated himself for what he must say next.

"This is going to be a suicide attack, darling. No one has been chosen. Volunteers will be called for. Naturally, I'll have to be one of those volunteers. None of us is expected to return."

He continued grimly, explaining in detail the nature of the new fighter craft that was to be used in the attack. Suddenly he stopped, his voice catching in his throat.

BEA had gone limp in his arms, fainted . . . Dick carried her home, grim-faced.

Back in his quarters, he walked slowly into his room, found Chanes already there, characteristically stretched out on his cot, smoking a cigarette.

Dick didn't speak, and Chanes merely said, "You told her?"

Dick nodded, slumping down on his bunk, head in hands.

Chanes' voice came to him. "What the hell, Dick. I understand. . . ." There was embarrassment, tempered with unspoken comradeship. Then Chanes was going on, haltingly.

"I had a girl like Bea, once. She was —she died—four years ago, when the Mongols took Berlin." His voice suddenly hardened. "So it's easier for me. There's no one left to give a damn."

Dick jumped up and grabbed his roommate by the shoulder. He shook Chanes until the other's teeth chattered.

"Don't say that!" he rasped between set teeth. "Don't ever say that again. You've been like a brother to me, and you know it."

And then Dick Starke blushed like a schoolboy, and Chanes punched him softly in the jaw.

* * *

THEY met that evening in the old arsenal. Sixty flight officers and some twenty mechanics, and no one was smiling. Flight Commander Craig Starke, looking more worn and haggard then before, faced them silently for several moments.

"Gentlemen," Starke began, his voice husky, "we are all aware of the reason for this assembly. All of you have had an opportunity to acquaint yourselves with the nature of our new combat ships this afternoon. Last night, I informed you as to the nature of the attack that we had planned. I told you frankly that the officers who man these space fighters are not expected to return."

Standing beside Dick, somewhere in the rear of the assembly, Chanes nudged him sharply.

"Here's the pitch," he whispered.

"There are forty-five of these ships," Starke went on. "We shall need the same number of men for our patrol." He looked meaningly at the ranks of men before him. "I've checked the roster of our squadrons, eliminating ten of the senior officers. They will not be permitted to sacrifice themselves, for obvious reasons stated in War Department instructions." He paused. "That leaves fifty men from whom I must draw my volunteers."

The silence was intense.

"I want all of you to understand that no one is obliged to offer himself for duty in this attack. . . . That's about all, gentlemen. Now I must ask for all

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who would volunteer to step forward."

The ranks of flight officers moved forward to a man.

Craig Starke smiled, rubbing his hand across his eyes.

"I expected as much," he said quietly. "But I can't use you all. We'll need men to remain at the Base. I'll check our roster, select those of you I need."

His eyes picked out his younger brother's face from the ranks.

"Dismissed, men," he said. But he was still looking at his kid brother.

CHAPTER VI

Off to Battle

SHORTLY before midnight an orderly knocked on the door of the room occupied by Dick Starke and Chanes. Dick, who had been sitting sleeplessly on the edge of his bunk, crossed the room in a stride and threw the door open.

"Lieutenants Starke and Chanes?" the orderly inquired.

"That's right." Dick's heart was pounding.

"Commander's compliments, sir," the orderly went on, handing two envelopes to Dick. "Instructions for the morning, sir."

Chanes hadn't been asleep, and now was up beside Dick, reaching for the envelope addressed to him.

"This is it!" he said excitedly.

Then they were reading the instructions entailed in each message. The orderly's heels could be heard clicking off down the hall.

"At six a.m.," Dick was reading aloud, "report at the hangar line for attack duty. Additional instructions will be issued there."

"Mine," said Chanes, "reads exactly the same. Well, fella, it looks as though we've been elected. . . ."

Before the sun rose on the following morning, Chanes was out of his bunk, quietly slipping on his clothes. When he had finished dressing he tiptoed cautiously across to where Dick lay sleeping, listened for a moment beside him. Then, satisfied that the other still slept, he crossed to the door. He opened it cautiously, listening again for a moment. Carefully he shut the door and moved off down the corridor.

Once outside Officers' Hall, Chanes turned toward the Strata Communications Building, some three hundred yards across the parade ground. Still moving carefully, he made his way across the field, climbed the steps to the Communications Building.

At the top of the steps he stood for a moment beside the door. Then he rapped softly, three short knocks followed by one heavy rap. After what seemed an eternity, the door opened and Chanes faced a rotund little man dressed in the uniform of a dispatch officer.

Chanes stepped into the lighted room, and the rotund little dispatch officer closed the door quickly behind him. The fat little fellow turned angrily.

"Are you a fool," he snarled, "coming here at this hour?"

"Take it easy," Chanes hissed. "I just wanted to check with you. The attack is planned, as you know by now, for sometime after six this morning. That gives you two hours in which to warn the ships lying outside the strata line of defense. They can spread the word to the others."

"Yes, yes," the little man snapped. "I'll take care of those details. You handle your end of it, and I'll carry out mine."

"Don't worry about me," Chanes scoffed. "When I get finished with the regular combat ships, there won't be one

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of them that can reach the strata line."

The other's eyes widened. "The regular combat ships are to convoy the new suicide rockets to the strata line?"

Chanes smiled. "That's the idea. Then the combat ships are to aid the suicide squadron in the attack. You did your work well. The High Command will be pleased, if you don't muff the last of it. These fools here are certain that New York has been taken. That phony message from General Blaine did exactly what Intelligence expected it to do. Now they've revealed their suicide fleet, and it can be destroyed with the utmost simplicity. Then, possibly, our commandant, the Great Khan, will actually take New York—once he has Base 10 under control."

THE rotund little dispatch officer smiled hastily.

"Fine. Excellent. I'll warn the Red Fleet, then, as soon as you leave."

Chanes was at the door. "Good enough. And I'll handle those combat convoys. Don't forget, tell the Red Fleet commanders that each of the new craft is equipped with high explosive in the nose. Careful marksmanship, with guns trained on that explosive, will eliminate the suicide fleet before they can do any damage."

Then Chanes was outside once more, slipping softly along in the shadows, moving toward the hangar line . . .

Sharply, the bugler's blasts woke the garrison of Base 10, two hours later. Lights flickered on in Officers' Hall, and men began to pour across the field. Mechanics threw open hangar doors, rolling out the space fighter ships. Moments passed. Mingled voices, hushed with excitement, rose and fell as men moved about.

Then the sudden ear-splitting din of the rockets, splatting to a crescendo, as mechanics warmed the ships. Orange spurts, a long line of them, flashed through the half darkness of the morning.

Flight Commander Craig Starke stood in the center of the parade ground, before him a row of flight officers.

He was peering upward, studying the sky, which was a quilting of clouds scattered across gray splotches that would turn into blue with the coming of the sun. The cloud strata behind those splotches was thick, yet ragged enough to give Starke some idea of the conditions in the world behind the gray cotton—a world wherein the invaders' flotilla lay in wait, like a tiger about to pounce.

Dick Starke, standing beside Chanes, shivered slightly in the cold of the morning, shivered too from the excitement that held the field in an electric static.

An officer was moving along the line in which they stood, handing out paper disks, upon which numbers were stamped. He gave the disks to Dick and Chanes.

"What are these for?" Dick muttered to his companion.

"The number on the disk designates the single-seater to which you're assigned," Chanes replied, his eyes following the progress of the rotund little dispatch officer who moved along handing out more disks.

The banging of the rockets had been subdued. Subdued enough for Craig Starke's voice to carry to the men who stood before him.

"Gentlemen, you will be escorted by regular combat ships. There have been only thirty-five of you assigned to the suicide fleet. In the nose of each suicide ship is enough explosive to blow a full-sized space dreadnought to smithereens. This explosive is the last measure which you will be called upon to employ.

"The use is obvious. But don't for-

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get, dive for the enemy only after all your other ammunition has been exhausted. There are radio control panels in each of the new single-seaters. Through means of this, I shall keep in touch with the suicide fleet. Good luck, gentlemen!"

Then Dick was gripping Chanes' hand, hard. His voice was husky.

"Good luck, fellow."

Chanes looked at him for a moment, wordlessly. A look as of pain crossed his face. His voice, when he replied, was unsteady.

"So long, youngster. Tough it had to turn out like this . . ."

DICK had been assigned single-seater 8. Chanes was slated for number 7. They walked together silently for perhaps thirty yards before arriving at their crafts.

Looking down the line, Dick saw that his brother was climbing into one of the combat space fighters, with two other officers and a gunner. Something came into his throat then.

He, Dick Starke, was going to die. He was a soldier, and death was a soldier's lot. But Craig—Craig hadn't even spoken to him—

"Dick!"

The young officer wheeled, to face Bea Walters. She was standing misty-eyed before him, but her chin was firm, her head upraised.

"Bea!" The name came brokenly from him, and he stepped forward, folding the girl in his arms. "Bea," darling," he murmured. "I wish you hadn't come. It makes it harder for me to leave you."

"I'm not here to stop you, Dick," Bea said, her voice quivering. "It's just to say"—her voice broke—"good-by!"

"Good-by, darling." Somehow Dick had managed to say it. And then he was pushing her from him, climbing into the tiny single-seater space ship. It was easier that way, quicker.

A mechanic was rolling the glass turret across the cockpit, a turret that permitted almost complete visibility on all sides. But the gauges in front of Dick Starke were a blur, and he wiped a hand fiercely across his eyes.

Then, from the radiophone panel, he heard the voice of his brother, issuing the first command.

"Combat ships are to go up first. They will wait for the regular combat squadron to follow, just inside the strata line."

The noise that had been deafening a moment before increased to incredible proportions now as the full blast of the combat rockets was turned on. A series of swishing, silver streaks, disappearing beyond the gray of the sky, marked the take-off of the first space fighters.

Then Dick was gunning the rockets of his own tiny ship, ears ringing to the clamor of the other suicide fighters on the line as they too prepared to scream upward.

In the moments before he released full throttle force, Dick inspected the bomb releases, and the forward gun mechanisms. All was in order. Then his hand sought the throttle, pulled back. A moment later, and the tiny ship was hurtling upward into space.

CHAPTER VII

In Crucial Combat

DICK STARKE was through the first overlayer, making for the strata line, when he took his first look about him. On all sides, flying combat formation, were the other single-seaters. Dick wondered vaguely where Chanes had taken position. Then, for a sickening instant, he remembered the nitroglycerin that was stored in the nose of the

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craft. He would never land again.

Last flight! The words beat over and over again in his brain until at last, by sheer power of will, he drove them out. He felt better then. He was a space fighter out on patrol. Nothing more. Forget the rest. Didn't help to think of it, anyway. . . .

Minutes later the mystery ship attackers sighted their combat convoy. Ten ships, motors idling, rockets silent, waited their arrival. Dick managed to pick out the ship in which his brother was riding. Craig Starke hadn't said "so long," hadn't made the slightest gesture in his direction. To hell with it, Dick thought bitterly. I'm a space fighter, that's all. A human bomb.

The combat ships, on sighting the single-seaters, came to life, rocket splashes spitting orange from their tails, and moved up to meet the convoyed suicide squadron.

Dick cut the throttle, and the light on his radiophone panel glowed. Then Craig Starke's voice came in.

"Follow closely on the tails of your convoy. According to estimates, we encounter the enemy inside of fifteen minutes." Then: "To Lieutenant Dick Starke. Good luck, kid!"

A lump came swiftly to Dick's throat. That had been Craig! Craig! He'd not forgotten him. Dick swallowed hard, grinned a funny half grin. Hell—it wasn't so bad, now. Not nearly so bad!

Five minutes later the panel light glowed a g a i n. Flight Commander Starke's voice came in this time with calmness, steel written in every inflection.

"Single-seater 7," he said. "Single-seater 7. You have been under observation ever since arrival at Base 10. You were closely watched several hours ago."

Dick frowned in perplexity. "What the devil— Why, that's Chanes' number!"

His brother's voice went on harshly. "The messages sent to the enemy were permitted to go through, Lieutenant Chanes, because we wanted it that way. The ships you tampered with this morning were repaired before flight—even the ship in which you now are, the single-seater from which you removed the explosives—hoping to save your own hide.

"The nose of your ship is loaded, Chanes, loaded with explosives. Your scheme boomeranged a hundred percent, Chanes. Now you've got to pay the penalty."

Dick was thunderstruck. Explosives? Chanes had removed the nitro from his own ship? Impossible! Absolutely insane. . . .

"Yes, Chanes," Dick heard his brother's relentless voice. "You didn't get away with it. We're safely in space now, Chanes. You can't reach the enemy. And you're cooked. Through. Washed up!"

There was a static interruption, then Starke's voice flooded through, clearly.

"To all men in the suicide squadron! It is only now that I am able to announce that *there is no explosive in the nose of any single-seater!* It was a necessary ruse, gentlemen, to thwart spies within our ranks. You are not a suicide group, men. You're a fighting unit—and I'll expect some hell-for-leather combat from the bunch of you! Stay clear of ship 7, piloted by Chanes. His ship carries high explosives!"

Dick's head was swimming with a thousand unanswered questions. Chanes a *spy?* Had this all been a trick to delude the enemy into acting on false information? The realization came with considerable of a shock, the more so because he had grown fond of his erstwhile roommate.

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THEN, swiftly, Dick saw a silver streak shoot out in front of their formation, throttle wide open, fast disappearing. It was Chanes! Chanes, heading for his Mongol comrades, trying to arrive before the Earth fleet engaged the hordes of Kama Khan. Craig Starke barked through the radiophone,

"There's our spy! After him! He'll take us straight to the enemy!"

Dick gunned forward full throttle. But the formation, bound by military flight lines, couldn't hope to catch Chanes. Ten minutes passed without a sight of him. Then they saw his ship—and the huge space dreadnoughts of the Red Fleet. They had contacted the enemy!

A thrill raced down Dick's spine as he saw his brother's combat space ship kick over in a wheeling arc, signal for the attack.

Chanes had been trying to signal, warn the Mongol fleet; but Dick, as he drew closer, saw instantly what had happened. The invaders, mistaking him for an enemy, had driven him off with a vicious burst of fire!

For a split second Dick felt a surge of pity for the young spy. Then his brother's voice, barking combat commands, came through.

"Single-seaters bear down on the largest of the space battleships! Combat craft, engage the dreadnought group. All space craft, stay clear of Chanes. He's still dangerous, with that explosive. If you get the chance, fire on him from long range—and aim for the nose of his fighter! He's the only 'suicide fighter' in this man's outfit!"

Dick barely heard the last. Dick didn't hear anything for the next few minutes, because he suddenly found himself in a fight that he'd never forget if he lived to be a hundred.

For as he dived, in formation with three single-seaters, the huge sides of the Mongol space battleships came whipping up at him through the gunsights of his forward detonon mortar. He pulled the trips savagely, releasing shell after shell at the red side of the nearest enemy craft.

He could see men running pellmell along the decks of the vessel in crazy panic. The guns of the huge dreadnought swiveled helplessly, trying to line on the Earth ship. Then he was past the craft with a final burst of shellfire.

Wheeling in a fast arc, Dick was about to return to attack when the last shell his detonon gun had projected burrowed into the dreadnought's vitals. There was a mushroom of white flame followed by a terrific explosion. Dick held on for dear life as his little pursuit fighter was tossed about like a cork in a gale.

When he had regained control, he peered out through the glass turret over the cockpit. He ducked his head instinctively, as a rain of fragments showered down. Score Number 1 for the Earth fleet!

Then Dick found himself in the midst of a milling, spitting vortex in which Earth pilot and Mongol killer fought viciously for supremacy. He felt his ship shake, jerked his head around and found a Mongol fighter hard on his tail.

Shouting his defiance, Dick made his century's version of an Immelmann turn and was blasting away at his opponent's rear in a matter of seconds. There was a sudden *puff!* and the Mongol simply disintegrated.

DICK pulled up and took a hurried inventory. All over the sky Mongol dreadnoughts were being engaged by the speedy little hornets which Craig Starke had unleashed upon them. The protective guard of Mongol pursuit

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ships circled helplessly about, unable to compete in such swift maneuvering. Every few seconds there was another explosion as a Mongol battlecraft blew up.

Suddenly Dick found himself on the outskirts of the battle, about to circle back into the fray. He scanned the skies for any lurking Mongol fighter—and caught a lone scout streaking heavenward in an Earth ship.

Chanes! Teeth grimly locked, Dick screamed in pursuit. In three minutes he was within range. But Chanes' ship was just as fast. Like two angry wasps, Mongol and Earthman buzzed about each other.

Dick never knew whether he or Chanes was the better pilot. He only knew that his ex-roommate was loaded up with nitroglycerin and was in much the more dangerous position. He only knew that suddenly he was streaking broadside at Chanes, and that all at once the spy's frantic face loomed behind the closed-in glass turret.

Chanes made frantic gestures, and abruptly Dick understood. If he fired at the spy, the resulting detonation from the nitroglycerin would blow both to kingdom come. He could afford only to shoot at the ship from long range.

And that, Dick couldn't force himself to do. "I'm a space pilot, not a butcher," he told himself fiercely. "That—that smells too much of boxing a rat in a trap."

Further strain on his conscience was relieved when Chanes suddenly unholstered a revolver-like ray gun he'd evidently concealed on his person. Chanes gestured then, motioned for Dick to make tracks. And Dick understood.

The spy was going to shoot through the fuselage of his ship, toward the nose. He, Chanes, had failed in his mission. He was disgraced. For an Oriental, there was no other way out.

Tears came to Dick's eyes, angry tears. So Chanes was giving him a chance to escape—because the resulting concussion at such short range would mean double annihilation. Chanes—spy, Mongol, deadly enemy to his race—was a man after all!

Dick edged closer to the spy. "Go back!" he shouted over the interspace radiophone whose mouthpiece was set in place in his helmet. "I'll take you prisoner! Land!"

And through his headphones came back, "Sorry, fella. But they shoot spies, you know. And even your influence couldn't get me off. It's better this way, Dick. After all, I'm a disgraced man. I failed in my mission. Turn off your headphones, son. . . ."

There was a whistling streak through the sky, and Chanes screamed away in a widening arc. For a moment Dick sat rigid, holding his breath. Then quickly he switched off his headphones, in the nick of time. With a tremendous detonation Chanes blew himself into oblivion. The explosion was so great that even at this distance, thousands of feet away, Dick's pursuit craft tossed about madly. If he had left the headphones on, that last blast through Chanes' radiophone would have torn his eardrums right out of his head.

Shaking the tears from his eyes, Dick barged back into the battle. But there was no more battle. Every single Mongol dreadnought had been blown asunder. Off toward the horizon were flashing streaks, remnants of the Mongols' pursuit ship convoy, streaking for home for their very lives.

An hour later, the victorious youngsters of Space Base 10 gathered in the office of Flight Commander Craig Starke. Each instinctively counted noses. Ten men were missing. Others among them showed the grueling strain of the battle, in bruised heads knocked

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against cockpit coamings, stiff limbs, eyes still narrow with the horror that had raged.

"Gentlemen!" Craig Starke rose from his chair. "Gentlemen, my congratulations. You have done well today—very well indeed. As a result of your successful flight, the Mongol hordes have been dangerously weakened. They have lost some of their most powerful space battlecraft. Gentlemen, I believe this flight today marks the turning point in the war."

The pilots of Space Base 10 looked at one another, and there were fervent murmurs of approval.

A GIRL stood up then, as Starke beckoned to her. A girl with glorious blond hair, who had been sitting next to the commander's desk. A girl whom everyone knew as Bea Walters, daughter of their late senior officer.

"Gentlemen," Starke said vibrantly, "we have this young lady to thank for the lives of all of us. It was she who discovered that Chanes was a Mongol spy."

"How?" came the chorus from a score of husky, amazed voices.

Starke smiled at their eagerness. "Miss Walters is—ah—a woman," he said. "And being a true member of her sex, she was struck intuitively with the fact that when the invaders bombed us in that vicious raid, Chanes seemed to be less shocked, less indignant than any of us.

"The more she thought about it, the stranger it loomed in her mind. So one evening at mess, when all the officers were out, she slipped into Officers' Hall and went through Chanes' outfit with a fine-tooth comb. And she found —this."

Dramatically he took a small object from his desk and held it up to view. It was a gold circlet attached to a linked gold chain. The circlet pictured a rising sun, with little diamond satellites on the horizon.

"Chanes wore that next to his heart," Starke explained. "He'd been up for a physical examination that afternoon; so he'd left it tucked away in his suitcase. After Miss Walters turned it up, we had him watched every second."

Dick Starke flushed and blurted out, "And you knew that all the time—when he was right in the same room with me!"

Flight Commander Starke smiled tolerantly. "You never would have believed me," he said softly. "You might have —er—spilled the beans to Chanes, and then we would have lost that much ground. After all, he was like a second brother to you—wasn't he, Starke?"

Craig Starke's nearest of kin blushed furiously. The rest of the pilots took the cue and trooped quietly out of the room, grinning broadly. Bea walked over to Dick's side and put her arm through his.

"It's just one of those things, Dick," she murmured.

Flight Commander Starke rubbed his chin. "I'm afraid the little lady's right, Dick," he said, in a smile that was anything but official.

The youngster's head jerked up. He saw that smile.

"Oh! So you weren't sore at me! You—"

"Sure I was sore at you—still am. I want you to be a doctor, not a space gunner. Hell, Dick, you ought to know that a fellow can't show favoritism in this man's airforce. Bad for morale, discipline—"

Dick strode forward and made a pass at his brother. Starke ducked, caught him about the middle and dragged him to a bench, kicking furiously. He laid him out over his knee, flexed his big hard palm and brought it

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MYSTERY of the MARTIAN PENDULUM

At the heart of Mars a great pendulum swung, ticking out an inexorable doom to Earthmen!

by THORNTON AYRE and A. R. STEBER

"HOW far down in this damned planet do you think the stuff might be, Cliff?"

Val Morrison asked the question. He sat folded up outside the tent wall, short pipe crackling between his big teeth. Six feet four, thin as a knife-blade, with a face like a pickaxe, he was possibly the toughest man in the whole outfit. He sat regarding Cliff Anderson now through his tiny, merry little dark eyes.

"Lord knows!" The chief engineer rubbed his big, stubby chin. "Doesn't matter much, anyway; these Martian guys who went before us did a whole lot of chiseling. We're down two thousand miles already—but no sign of *anilum* so far. Soon we'll hit Mars' core. Mebbe we'll find something before then."

"Yeah—we hope . . ." Val drew at his pipe dubiously.

The sudden blare of signal sirens came from the depths. The whining din echoed through the reaches of the tunnels and shafts. The voices of the men at the head of the main shaft came forth in a murmur of sound.

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Immediately Cliff and Val were on their feet, glancing at each other.

"Guess they must have hit something vital," Val said briefly.

He started to move forward as he spoke, Cliff beside him. At the pit top Cliff elbowed his way through the men.

"What's wrong below? What's happened?"

The radio operator in contact with below glanced up.

"Number 4 unit operating in underground cavern has encountered a steel wall, sir. Want your advice . . ."

"Steel wall? Down there!" Cliff looked his amazement. "But how the devil did—"

"Oh be damned to conjectures; let's go," Val snapped, and strode forward into the waiting shaft cage. He waited until Cliff had joined him, then threw in the switches.

For several minutes they dropped steadily down through the miles of shafting thrust deep into the planet's bowels. At last they touched bottom, flung back the grille, then hurried over to the group of engineers gathered round their enormous boring machine. It had stopped before a massive rotunda of gray metal stretching up into the cavern ceiling and on either side as far as the eye could see.

Richardson, the engineer in charge, nodded to the barrier as Cliff came up.

"Thought it was *anilum* at first, Cliff, but our tests show it is steel of sorts. All in one piece; been flowed together by some skilled process. No sign of a join. Thought you'd better see it before we tried blasting it through. Might be something dangerous on the other side."

Cliff surveyed it keenly. "Such as?"

"You never know. Maybe molten lava: even conserved water supplies. Might be anything. The Martians sure didn't mean it escaping whatever it is . . ."

Val drew at his noisy pipe. "Might even be Martian life behind it," he murmured. "I'm not fooling," he went on, seeing Cliff's doubting look. "After all, I figure the Martians must have gone somewhere, and we've seen no trace of life in the upper or surface regions since we landed on this hell-fired planet."

Cliff tugged out his ray gun and fired it experimentally at the barrier. The metal sizzled and liquefied under the heat. He nodded curtly.

"O.K., start blasting it through. But take it easy and use a small radius. If there's anything dangerous released we'll have time to get clear anyway."

The big engineer gave the order. With Val beside him, Cliff mounted to the borer's flat deck and stood among the crew. In the belly of the ship's control room the men set about their tasks. The powerful tractors moved. A needle-pointed spear of incandescent heat stabbed the barrier and began to drive through it like a white-hot needle through a slab of butter. The air began to reek of heated metals and electric discharges.

At the end of a half-hour the reaction instruments showed the boring was finished. Immediately cooling radiations were forced through the barrier and searchlights were swung onto the foot-wide hole.

Staring into it the engineers could see nothing but darkness.

"There's air anyway," Val said, frowning. "Distinct draft blowing through."

"That might be the air blowing right through the planet from the other side,"

**Anilum* is a metal which makes tungsten look like putty in comparison. Fredison, the space explorer, first discovered the stuff on Mars. Due to its extreme value, the United States sent Cliff Anderson to discover the mother lode if at all possible.—Ed.

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Cliff mused. "Doesn't seem attenuated enough though . . ."

He shrugged and turned to the borers.

"All right; finish the job," he said. "Use full range this time and plow right through."

THIS time the beam incorporated an area wide enough to permit of the entire borer machine following it through. As before it took it thirty minutes to nose its juggernaut way through the wall, which was all of twenty-five to thirty feet in thickness. Once beyond the barrier engineers stood sniffing the stale, musty air and gazing round in the glare of the searchlights.

They were within a colossal artificially bored cavern, filled with an extraordinary number of gray metal balls dotted about in various directions. Some were large and some small, but all were bolted and riveted immovably to tripod stands of metal. Right and left they went, round the natural curve of the cavern out of sight. In the cavern's center was yet another ball of metal, gray like the smaller balls, and apparently a kind of master ball. The distance to the major ball was perhaps two miles. How far the cavern itself really extended was lost in darkness.

The air seemed to be coming from a source in the cavern hidden by the major ball.

Cliff climbed down from the borer and went to the nearest ball, stood looking at it perplexedly. At last he turned to the others and held up his hand for silence.

In a moment it was clear that the little ball was whirring mysteriously like a spring uncoiling.

"Machinery!" Richardson ejaculated.

Silence fell on the party again as there came a new sound through the heavy silence—a solemn, deliberate ticking like that of a giant grandfather clock.

It went on steadily and Cliff consulted his watch.

"Something is ticking at exactly three second intervals," he proclaimed finally. "And it has only just started. . . . Looks like we have stumbled onto something, boys."

Val said slowly, "The ticking comes from that giant ball there. Let's take a look at it."

They mounted the borer again and drove forward the intervening distance. The progress of the journey made the ticking all the more audible, until by the time they had reached the giant ball itself it was a solemn reverberation that boomed along the floor.

Tick . . . Tock. Tick . . . Tock.

"Time bomb?" Vale suggested laconically.

"Quit clowning," Cliff snapped impatiently. "It's pretty plain we started the works going by coming in here. Nothing happened until we went over to look at that smaller ball. Somehow I don't like it. There's a deliberation about that ticking that's kind of ominous."

"Yeah . . ." Val meditated. He said, "Suppose before we start forming opinions we look around a bit? This air mystery, for instance . . ."

CHAPTER II

Invisible Enemy

AT the rear of the giant ball they discovered the reason for the air supply and its un-Martian density. A titanic vent sunken into the floor, and presumably communicating by a complicated shafting system to the other side of Mars itself—right through to the surface—was covered with a massive

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lid of machinery, the unit itself being housed inside a transparent case. The components were working visibly in the midst of a mass of thin gluey substance.

As the thin air streamed up the giant shaft it passed into one giant valve in the machinery, went through an amplifying process by which heavier air pressure was added, and was then expelled by a piston system at the other side of the machine, a massive pipe being driven through the tough outer casing. The thing was virtually the mechanical heart of Mars pumping out good air from thin, spent currents.

"The Martians were damn good engineers, anyway," Val commented. "But just why did they need to give air to this cavern in particular when there is only a lot of balls in it that don't need air to work in . . . ?"

"Unless," Cliff mused, "they wanted intelligent life to come into this cavern and have a look round in order to start the machinery going. The air would invite anybody inside—as it did us. I'll bet, when we broke through the wall, we completed a circuit that started the air pump working."

Val's pipe crackled. "Say, maybe you've got something. Anyway, we can check up on that by examining the wall later. What we've got to do right now is find out what makes these balls tick."

He tugged out his gun and fired it experimentally at a corner of the heart's transparent casing. The beam simply glanced off. Val stared blankly.

"By all the saints, it's *anilum!*" he gasped. "Moulded *anilum,* at that. Ray guns will never penetrate this! It takes a temperature of something like 15,000° C. to melt it.

"Everything in this cave's made of *anilum,*" said Cliff.

THE engineers glanced at each other, then with one accord they looked at the monster ball. Within it something was still ticking solemnly at regular three-second intervals.

"Say, something's just occurred to me," Val said presently. "Is it possible that we're right at the core of Mars and that this giant metal ball is *natural?* Or at least it was natural until it changed into unthinkably hard *anilum.**

"So what?" Cliff's brows were knitted.

"If the Martian engineers found a way to hollow out its center, which is quite conceivable, they might have put something inside it. From the stuff out of the center they manufactured all these other little balls. We'd probably find by mathematics that the material used in these little balls equals the extracted mass from inside the larger one. In plain words, pressure changed nickle iron into *anilum,* but Martian science was clever enough to enable the Martians to find out how to bore through it and hollow it out. The seam of *anilum* which Fredison found seems to show that that seam was ejected volcanically, proving conclusively that it *was* from the bowels of Mars."

"Which might explain why we can't find *anilum* on Earth," Cliff mused. "So far our Earth has not ejected any of its deep baser material; only the upper molten metals. Deep down there *will* be *anilum,* but we shall never find it until Earth is as riddled with passages to its core as Mars now is. Yes, Val, I think you've got something . . . But I'll be damned if I understand the Mar-

*Every planet has a ball of metal in its center under terrific pressure—nickle iron center. In a normal planet like Earth it is a liquid solid—a paradoxical way of showing what pressure can do with a solid. But in a world like Mars, or the Moon, where the rest of the planet is practically dead and shrunken, the pressure round the center has relaxed, it might leave a solid ball of metal, which because *of* that pressure might become *anilum.*—Ed.

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tian purpose."

The puzzled silence that fell on the group was broken suddenly by a hoarse scream from Richardson. He had wandered from the others to inspect the next steel ball. Simultaneously with his scream everybody present saw a light wink momentarily with blinding brilliance high up in the lofty ceiling of the chasm. Richardson, dead in line with it, collapsed his length on the cavern floor.

"My God!" Cliff ejaculated, startled —then he rushed forward with the others beside him.

That they were too late was obvious the moment they turned the engineer over. His face was charred to ashes, the upper part of his neck and chest were burned away horribly.

Cliff raised a grim face and stared round on the now inscrutable roof and its galleries of rock and pumice stone.

"Something mechanical that killed him," he whispered, standing up again. "Boys, we're facing something deadly around here. It's got to be located . . ."

He stood watching bitterly as the unfortunate Richardson was carried to the borer. The solemn ticking of the giant ball followed the stunned party.

ONCE back at the upper levels in the base camp Cliff summoned his engineering chiefs from their different tasks and put the position to them.

". . . and so we face a mystery," he concluded. "Down there in the core of Mars is a mechanical system of destruction controlled by God knows what. It's taken Richardson. We know neither the extent nor the nature of the thing we're fighting—but we do know that we are going to stop it. We've found *anilum* too, though not exactly in the way we had hoped. That makes searching in other parts of this planet unnecessary. What you have got to do is get every available flame gun machine and transport it down to the lower cavern. We're going to try and liquefy those *anilum* balls, and the big one which ticks. We have one or two portable furnaces and since the balls are on tripods we can shove the furnaces under them.

"You, Townshend, are our chief scientist." Cliff looked at the squat, broad-shouldered man standing before him. "You'll go to work to try and figure out why those balls tick, and what they are supposed to be. It won't be easy, and you may never solve the mystery—but there's no harm in trying."

"I've got the instruments; maybe I'll find something." Townshend nodded his gray head.

"We others will go to work to find out exactly what it was that struck Richardson down," Cliff concluded grimly. "Sparks, you stay here in case we have to radio to Earth for help."

He turned to the door of the base with the others beside him. Then they paused and glanced at each other quickly at a sudden alien sound. It was a noise such as they had never heard before on Mars, a noise other than that of their own work.

From remote distances came clanging concussions, the rattle of metal flanges slamming against each other and followed by the sharper note of locks snapping into position. Four times it was repeated. Twice from high over their heads and twice from below their feet. Then all was quiet again.

"You know something," Val said in the ensuing calm, "I dare to think that that was the locks to the outer surface closing! There are four of them you know . . ."

Puzzled, loath to believe the startling possibility of Val's assertion, Cliff led the way to the shaft cage. Once the men were gathered—fifty in all—the

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descent began. Ten minutes later the entire party was back in the cavern.

The searchlights on the borer were switched on and Cliff gave brief instructions. Then while three men remained to watch the searchlights and guide them according to orders, the others went to work to examine the rocky walls of the place inch by inch. Ladders were set up against the approximate spot where the light had burned out Richardson's life.

Val and Cliff chose this particular task as their own especial duty. It took them some fifteen minutes of searching to discover a ball of *anilum*, only a small one, imbedded in the rock. In the center of the ball was curiously faceted lens.

"Looks like a glorified limelight," Val said, scratching his head. "Not a chance of moving it. Only thing to do is to avoid it."

"Yeah, I guess you're right—"

Cliff broke off with a start and turned round with dangerous speed on the ladder at a sudden wild scream from the opposite side of the cavern. He and Val were just in time to see part of the floor crack suddenly up the center in so neat a chasm that it was obviously mechanical. The floor simply fell apart in one complete seam—but into it dropped nearly thirty of the workers gathered in a bunch to inspect the giant ball. Their screams, mingled with the grinding roar of the floor's parting, filled the giant cavern with hideous commotion.

Cliff started to say something, then changed his mind. He scrambled down the ladder at top speed with Val tumbling after him. With the other workmen and scattered engineers they raced across in long leaps to the opening—but before they reached it it began to close with invincible power like the jaws of a mammoth press. The agonized cries from below lapsed abruptly into silence. With a mighty clang the metal floor linked up again, leaving a line so thin it was almost indetectable.

Cliff wiped his sweating face and looked around in bewilderment on his comrades' horrified faces.

"I don't begin to understand it," he almost whispered. "This is unthinkable! Ghastly! Thirty of them trapped down there and then crushed to death. . . . We've got to stop this if it's the last thing we ever do! You realize that, all of you?" he nearly shouted.

"Yeah, sure. Take it easy. It wasn't your fault." Val's voice was gruff with sympathy.

"Not my fault, perhaps, but I'm head of the Expedition and responsible for everybody here. Try to think how I feel . . ." Cliff knelt down and stared at the closed jaws of the floor. He got up with a hopeless look in his eyes. "No possible chance of doing anything until we smash open these damned *anilum* balls!" he blazed. "Get dynamite, titanite, every damn thing! We'll blast this cavern wide open if we go to hell with it!"

Cliff twisted round sharply as Benson shouted hoarsely, "The air conditioning machine has stopped!"

"We've got our portable unit," Val said, relighting his pipe with feigned calmness. No time now to let panic gain a foothold. "Better get it, just in case we have trouble getting free."

Benson departed, and with him the men who were to bring the explosives. Cliff paced up and down swiftly, impatiently, watched by the other engineers. Most of them turned to look presently at the crack in the floor which had so ruthlessly swallowed up most of the party. They glanced uncertainly, furtively, around them, conscious of unseen but diabolical forces waiting to swallow them.

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Suddenly Townshend said, "Say, we might get to know what's in these little balls—and the big one too for that matter—by X-ray. If it will penetrate *anilum*, and there's no reason why not, we might be able to get a photograph of what's going on. Guess I'll go to work on that angle."

He departed actively, but in two minutes he returned suddenly. His face, usually so ruddy, had gone pale.

"Come and take a look . . ." he whispered.

CHAPTER III

More Death Traps

AT the words Cliff stopped pacing and raised a haggard face. He moved immediately with the others at his side. Outside the cavern entrance leading to the elevator shaft they stopped appalled. The workmen who had left, and Benson, were lying stretched motionless in a jumble of human figures not ten yards from the elevator.

His heart pounding, Cliff went warily forward in case the same fate overtook him. Nothing happened, however . . .

He needed only to look at Benson's ashy, contorted visage to know the condition of the others. They were dead, every man of them. Cliff turned bitter eyes up to the walls and ceilings, and though he could see nothing unusual he could guess the cause of the annihilation. From somewhere a clockwork sniping ray had done its deadly work.*

"We'll go up and fetch the explosives down for ourselves," he stated quietly. "Only way to be rid of the bodies is to incinerate them. Seems brutal, but there's no time for sentiment . . . We'll be next if we don't act fast. Let's go."

The six of them, all that remained except the radio operator above, moved charily toward the elevator and clambered inside. Cliff threw the switches; then as the cage began to rise, he gave a sudden shout. A blinding ray winked momentarily from the opposite wall of the cavern. A resonant twang caused him to glance up just in time to see the steel hawser split through four of its six strands.

"Look out!" he yelled hoarsely, and jammed the switch out of contact. The next instant the remaining strands parted and the cage dropped down the hundred foot length to the floor. Thanks to the lesser gravity the impact was lessened slightly, but just the same it was mighty enough to smash the bottom of the cage through.

Edwards and Saunders vanished in a smother of splintering timber and crumbling elevator walls. Cliff found himself thrown clear with Val on top of him. Townshend, Morton, and Gilby scrambled out with nothing worse than cuts and bruises.

Immediately they turned to help their buried colleagues, hurling aside timber and metal supports. Half way through the task Cliff called a halt.

"No use, boys; we're only wasting time. Take a look . . ."

He indicated the two hands unearthed from the wreckage. There were no indications of pulse beats on either wrist.

Cliff switched on his wrist radio and hooked the tiny phone in his ear. He half expected a dead silence from Sparks as he gave the call signal, but Sparks' voice answered at once.

*It is evident that in different parts of this underworld there were switches which, either when blocked by photoelectric cell system or else when trodden on, completed a circuit which hit directly on the person or object causing the circuit, just as antiaircraft guns automatically sight and hit an enemy plane. As regards the elevator, Benson and his men obviously completed another circuit with their deaths which was intercepted in the elevator. A system of progressive circuits, each one causing more to come into operation.—Ed.

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"What happened, Cliff? Cage give way? I was just figuring out what to do . . ."

"Only one thing you can do right now and that's drop a rope. And hurry!"

"O.K. Hang on; I'll fix a winch. And when you come up I've some news that'll interest you."

Cliff switched off.

"It's suicide!" Val protested. "If we cross the same point in the shaft again how do we know we won't be wiped out?"

Cliff shrugged. "Have to chance it. We can't stick here. If it took a whole cage to block the ray it's possible a small thing like a human body might get past without intercepting it."

IN a few minutes a cradle and rope came down the vast length of the shaft.

"I'll go first," Cliff said, slipping into the cradle. "If anything goes wrong, prepare to catch me!"

He gave two tugs and hung on tightly as the cradle began to rise. Nothing untoward happened. He sailed swiftly up past the danger point—higher and higher to the topmost levels. Sparks joined him anxiously at the winch top.

"How many others down there, Cliff?" he asked anxiously.

"Four," he answered with grim significance.

"The others coming up later, I suppose?"

"I only wish they were," Cliff muttered, and seeing the operator's amazed look he went on, "They're dead, Sparks—killed by mystic powers down in the bowels of this ungodly world. Tell you more afterwards. Get the others up first . . ."

Three times more the cradle was lowered, and Townshend, Val, and Morton arrived safely. But the fourth time there was a sudden ominous slackness in the rope followed by a desperate scream from far down in the depths. There came the thump of a body falling back on the ruin of timber. Cliff gave a frantic order and the winch screamed round its drum as the rope was whirled up. The end was smoking ominously.

"It got him," Cliff whispered. "We others avoided it, but Gilby must have been swinging from side to side and intercepted the beam . . . Hey, Gilby!" he yelled hoarsely. "Gilby! You there?"

There was no answer from the depths. Val reached out and tied the rope round his waist. "I'll go see . . ." he announced briefly, and before Cliff could say anything he nodded to Sparks who threw the switches that sent him into the depths.

There was an interval of five minutes in which the party waited anxiously, then came two tugs on the rope. Very slowly, due to extra weight, the winch began to turn. Val emerged with the blood spattered but still living figure of Gilby in his arms.

Gently Val laid him on the floor, turned his head for the emergency kit—but Gilby called him back weakly.

"No use doing that, Val," he whispered. "I'm—I'm sunk . . . But I guess I can tell you one thing. I—I saw where the electric eye lens is hidden . . . Behind a V-shaped chunk of rock . . . You—you'll find it. You can avoid it then. I—"

He fell back gently, became still.

The long succession of shocks had left the remaining engineers incapable of further emotions of pity. They could feel the same net of death tightening around them.

"We'll bury him—over there," Cliff said quietly. "The others we'll have to cremate . . . At least we know where the electric eye is and can dodge it even if we can't destroy it—"

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"Death traps!" muttered Val. "What *is* the reason for all this murdering?"

It was Townshend who answered. "Doesn't it begin to become evident that all this is a brilliant posthumous scientific trap built by a dying race for a definite reason? Maybe there's not so much mystery about it at all. All the other planets, as we well know now, are barren. If any living beings came here they'd *have* to be Earth people—and the chance of beings coming from systems way out among the stars is totally unlikely. Yes, it had to be Earth people—and when they had become clever enough to get here it meant they had an advanced civilization."

"What are you driving at?" demanded Cliff.

"Just this. No race as advanced as the Martians must have been to build this complex machinery would be petty enough or impractical enough to plan a mere death trap to operate after their demise. They had a specific and vastly important reason. Maybe this is all a test. A trap like this would eliminate an intruder not sufficiently advanced to measure up to the mysterious Martian purpose. Somehow that purpose is connected with that giant ticking ball down below."

"Sense in that," Cliff admitted, and added wryly. "If you're right, it looks as if we don't measure up to Martian standards. So far we've qualified only for the elimination class."

"Right," agreed Val. "We've got to solve the purpose behind that tick-tocking ball."

"In the meantime, Sparks, radio to Earth. Tell them to send blast furnaces and to try and unlock the surface valves. We'll bury Gilby and get to work below with the x-ray machines and flame gun batteries. We've little manpower now, and we've got to act fast. Let's get started—"

He halted abruptly as he saw Sparks was trying to interrupt him.

"What's the matter?"

"That's the news I was trying to tell you I have," Sparks said. "We can't radio. The batteries are dead. Some sort of radiation has burned them all out!"

CHAPTER IV

The Pendulum

ONCE Gilby was buried and a short service recited over his grave, the five returned to the depths, lowering their equipment down the shaft so that it missed the photoelectric eye. They reached below in safety, Sparks leaving his useless radio to help.

"You get to work on the smaller balls with the batteries and furnaces; I'll x-ray the big one," Townshend said, and immediately set about the erection of his equipment.

The next two hours were filled with intense activity for all of them, but as far as the flame gun batteries went they had no effect. The balls refused to melt. Even the limited furnaces at their disposal only warmed them.

On the other hand Townshend met with success and pointed to the ciné x-ray screen triumphantly. The rays, passing through the globe, gave a hazy shadowgraph moving picture of what was going on inside. In amazement the others stared on the multitude of black-outlined machinery, intersected cog upon cog, linking up with whole masses of complex mechanism and dominated by a mighty pendulum swinging deliberately to and fro.

"What the devil is it?" demanded Cliff blankly.

Townshend regarded it thoughtfully.

"So far as I can tell it is a cosmic clock—about one of the cleverest ideas

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I have ever seen. You have seen those clocks on Earth which work by the action of light photons? Well, this is a similar idea but embodying a different principle. This clock is definitely the brain of all these other balls. It works, I imagine, by the action of cosmic rays passing through the planet. Can't give you every detail right now; I'll have to get my instruments to work and see what they can analyze of the forces inside the globe."

"I have the uneasy feeling that it resembles a time bomb," muttered Val, staring at it. "It started to tick when we broke a circuit. How do we know but what at a given hour the whole thing will explode?"

"We don't," Townshend said grimly. "That's what I want to find out. If x-rays pass through the globe, so will others capable of analysis. You'd better set about helping me."

IMMEDIATELY there were further journeys to the surface and one by one detector instruments were carefully lowered, together with adding machines, automatic analyzers, and dozens of smaller attachments necessary to a complete survey. Townshend worked steadily, tireless and grim, checking and computing, apparently heedless of the rather distracting ominous beating of the mighty pendulum.

"I think," Townshend said finally, glancing up with a strained face, "at the present moment this giant ball is establishing an electromagnetic contact with Earth's center."

"What!"

Townshend pored over the instruments and notes again, waved an impatient hand.

"Leave me alone for a while; I want to be sure about this. We're heading for something mighty tough if you ask me."

There was nothing the other engineers could do but pace around until they decided to utilize their enforced idleness by cremating the bodies round the elevator base. Once it was done they stood for a while with heads bowed amidst the smoke of the gun discharges, then they returned quietly to the ball room. Townshend greeted them with a shout.

"Boys, we've got to stop this damn thing somehow! We've eighteen hours to do it in—no more! If we don't manage it the Earth will be pretty near blown in pieces by volcanic fires, earthquake, and God knows what else. Listen here!"

He went on tensely,

"Between worlds there is a common affinity—a bond of gravitation which centers in the nickel iron core based on each planet, large or small. An electromagnetic beam between worlds is bound to center on the exact center of each world. From here, the core of Mars, an electromagnetic beam is already being generated by the mechanism inside this ball. It has crossed the gap to Earth and automatically centers on the gravitative core of Earth. Earth and Mars are now chained by an invisible but unimaginably strong tunnel, its walls being forced, its apparently empty center being a path down which radiations can pass. Clear so far?"

"Go on," Cliff invited grimly.

"These instruments prove there is a potential force inside this globe of something like one million billion volts of energy, all of which will be released in one unthinkably terrible battering ram of force when the escape mechanism operates.

"Now, a force of that kind hurled through the electromagnetic beam—tube—and striking the magnetic center of Earth will create terrific havoc. The impact alone will be bad enough, but

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not half so bad as the abrupt dissemination of energy through all Earth's metallic seams. The forces of unleashed lightning will be conducted to the surface through numberless veins of metal. Metal will become electrified; in parts seams will explode to allow volcanic forces to shatter forth.

"You can picture the rest. If there are any survivors from electric shock and other catastrophes I'll be surprised."

"Just how is this incredible voltage built up?" Val demanded.

"It's been built up ever since the Martians died or vacated the planet."

Townshend pointed to various points on the x-ray screen.

"Here is the central mechanism. It is consistently absorbing the electric charges of the planet itself, which it generates by its spin against the ether in dynamolike fashion. It's been doing it for untold ages. A colossal potential power has been building up all this time.

"Part of it has passed into these other smaller balls by means of deeply sunk underground wires I imagine, which we can't reach, or to hidden mechanisms such as the one which opened the floor trap. That power has partly expended itself, but the main bulk is conserved for outlet against the Earth. It is so well balanced a unit that it remains fixed at this potential and transmits surplus and overload automatically—so had we not come here for another five centuries it would have made no difference.

"Here," Townshend concluded grimly, "is the escape mechanism. It releases the potential through the ether shaft. Take a look at it and count the beats of the pendulum!"

THE engineers surveyed their watches then glanced at the shadowed machine Townshend had indicated. There was no doubt about it. After every beat of the pendulum a tiny minute hand jerked up a slight degree, bringing it very gradually round to a giant hand fixed in the noon position of an Earth clock.

"See?" Townshend demanded. "Six hours have elapsed since this damned thing started. The numerical order of the clock is pretty similar to our own reckonings. That giant hand points to the twenty-four mark. Now, when the little hand is parallel with it it stands to reason that it will operate this catch on the left here, which you already see is slightly away from its fixture. It widens very gradually until, when the two fingers lie atop each other, the catch will be fully back and. . . ." He stopped, having no need to detail.

"Eighteen hours," Val whispered, plugging his pipe. "That's kind of short notice. . . ."

"We've got to try something!" Cliff said hoarsely. "We've got to get through this ball, even if it's only an inch at a time. We'll try blasting too. Morton, you, Sparks, get all the titanite you can lay your hands on and rush it down here. You others help me with the furnaces and batteries. . . ."

CHAPTER V

A Race Against Disaster

SUDDEN and tremendous activity descended on the cavern. Working at top speed, Cliff, Val and Townshend set up the ray-drillers in v-formation, ten all told, and centered them so that their blinding forces pointed directly on one focal point. They donned dark glasses, slammed the switches, and stood watching.

The brilliance of that one core of flame was blinding even through the dense goggles. At first it looked as though headway was being made, but

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when ten, twenty, and thirty minutes passed and there was no flow of molten metal hope began to die. Cliff gave a despondent motion at last and cut out the switches.

"No dice," he muttered, tugging his goggles free. They stood surveying the blackened but otherwise unharmed patch where the rays had played. "It's not even scratched, and Heaven knows how thick it is. We haven't enough heat. . . . Titanite might do it." He stood looking toward the door impatiently but there was no sign of Morton or Sparks, no sounds from beyond the cavern.

"They're the devil of a time," Townshend said uneasily.

"Say, do you think. . . ." Val put his pipe solemnly in his mouth.

All three of them swung to the entrance together and stalked through into the adjoining cavern. There was no sign of either Sparks or Morton. There was no response to Cliff's shouts. He turned quickly to the cradle and pointed to it in surprise. It was loaded with cases of titanite, but of the two men themselves there was no sign.

"Probably they're getting some more stuff, or else they—" Val shook himself. "What's the use?" he asked bitterly. "We've no time to look into it anyway. Let's get busy."

Between them they set about hauling the cases back into the cavern, stacked the long sticks of high powered explosive under the spot they had attacked with ray batteries. It took them an hour to make all the necessary fittings and connections, complete with fuses. The wire to the latter they paid out as they backed from the cavern. They took it with them to the elevator cradle and gradually unwound it from its drum as they rose upward to the higher levels once more.

Once they arrived there they solved the mystery of Sparks and Morton. Both of them lay motionless, face down near the storage camps. They were dead, holes burned in their chests and faces.

"More photoelectrics hidden somewhere," Townshend muttered. "If we ever get out of this dump alive I'll be surprised."

HE made a final contact.

"Ready?" he asked, gripping the raised plunger rod.

Cliff caught his arm.

"Wait a minute! I just thought of something. Supposing we blow up the globe? What happens to all that stored potential energy? It won't travel to Earth—so, just *where?*"

"Can't you guess?" Townshend grinned almost ghoulishly.

"You mean," Val said, lighting his pipe, "that it will radiate to all parts of Mars and that we're sunk. . . ."

"Just that. Either us—or Earth. We can take our pick—maybe. Considering we had fifty men twelve hours or so ago and there are only three of us left now it doesn't take imagination to see where we go. Just the same, Cliff, you're the boss. Do I—?"

"Far as I'm concerned, ram in that plunger," Cliff replied grimly.

"Shoot!" Val thumbed down his pipe bowl, but his eyes watched the rod with a steady glitter.

Townshend rammed the plunger home. All three of them stood motionless and sweating as a titanic concussion blasted from the depths. The floor rocked under their feet; hot air came gushing up the chasm from the elevator shaft. The walls groaned and rocked under expanding forces and the floor ceased to be.

Cliff felt himself flung into space, went reeling through darkness with the shouts of Townshend and Val ringing in his ears. He landed with a force that

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knocked all the breath out of his body—but he was unhurt. The lesser gravity had saved him from mortal injury and chance had thrown him on top of the subsidence instead of underneath it. He lay still in an abyss of dark, quivering, listening.

There was only one sound. Tick—tock. Tick—tock.

THEN it had failed. The mechanism was still working! Scrambling to his feet Cliff pulled his torch from his belt and tested it gingerly. It flickered for a moment then steadied. He flashed the beam round on an incredible vision of chaos. The explosion had blown the roof out of the cavern, buried several of the smaller balls under a mountain of debris. Equipment, particularly the rubbish magnetizers that had been on the upper levels, had tumbled down here, undamaged thanks to their massively strong casings. Of Townshend and Val there was no sign. They were somewhere amidst all this with the life crushed out of them.

Cliff's gaze swung to the giant ball. It was smoky black from the explosion, but otherwise untouched and unbudged. The solemn ticking was like a knife to Cliff's nerves. He looked round him desperately, trying to imagine how much time there was left. Now the x-ray machines had been smashed in the upheaval he had no means of seeing where the indicator had reached.

With a thud he sat down, trying frantically to think of a last possible way. His own life didn't matter now: it was Earth that counted, with its millions of unsuspecting souls. In the gloom and the dark of those moments the mechanism was his only company.

Tick—tock. Tick—tock. And each move bringing nearer the consumation of a posthumous plot to destroy and avenge.

CHAPTER VI

Alone—with Ticking Death

TICK-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

As Cliff sat there, each swing of the giant pendulum grew more inexorable, its ticking growing in the utter silence of a dead planet's interior until it became a thundering vibration that pounded in his ears like the measured tread of Death himself.

Tick-tock! *Tick-tock!* TICK-TOCK!

Cliff leaped to his feet, his brain reeling.

"No!" he shouted. "By the gods, no!"

Furiously he rushed at the giant ball, beat against it with his fists as though the physical contact would relieve the terrific pressure that was building up inside him; a pressure that bade fair to equal the awful potentiality that was stored up in that sphere of destruction. He backed away with a sob, fingers bleeding, and tore his ray gun from his holster.

He held it on the ball until its charge was exhausted; then he hurled the useless tool at it.

The gun rang against the immutable metal, clattered away into the shadows of the cavern.

Silence fell again, except for the sound of the pendulum, measured, undisturbed, grimly purposeful.

TICK-TOCK! TICK-TOCK!

Cliff stared about, through the gloom.

"Science," he muttered. "An incredible, diabolic science. These Martians knew too much."

He moved about among the tumbled rubbish of the explosion, braving the possibility of still further hidden devices of sudden death stabbing burning horror down upon him from the darkness.

"Thousands of years ago they all

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died," he went on through clenched teeth, "but they are still here, in spirit, brooding, gloating, like these infernal balls, over the death that is their power to call down. But they won't succeed in their damned plan! No, by God, they won't!"

He stared about, a bit wildly.

"Somewhere among all these damned machines must be one that can be turned against that ball; one that'll open it . . . Funny if their great science didn't have that power. They hollowed out the balls in the first place, moulded others. Maybe. . . ."

Grimly he searched, prying about in the debris that lay upon the floor, examining each ball that he found, pushing and shoving at each machine he encountered.

But nowhere did he find anything that resembled a tool or weapon or force that would answer his purpose. All of it, it seemed, was for one purpose—to guard the great ball against harm, rather than to destroy it, and to kill all who entered the cavern.

AS he stumbled on in growing terror and realization of his utter helplessness to stop the diabolic swing of that giant pendulum, no sudden death lashed out at him.

He shook a fist into the emptiness.

"At least we did that!" he shouted. "We wrecked your infernal control apparatus that operated these murdering rays and traps!"

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. TICK-TOCK.

Cliff's brain seemed to pulsate in rhythm with the booming noise of the pendulum. It began to permeate his whole body, become the beat of his very heart superseding its natural rhythm, slowing his very life processes to its own deadly pace.

He stumbled on.

Then, suddenly, he came to a rigid halt, his eyes fixed on a looming figure in the gloom. A human form it seemed —a living form.

"Who's that?" Cliff croaked. "Who's there . . . ?"

Suddenly he rushed forward, incredulous hope flooding into his icy brain.

"Val!" he shouted. "You escaped the landslide . . ."

His voice froze in his throat.

It wasn't Val. It was a statue; a metal figure, tall as a man, but not like a man. It wasn't a human figure at all.

He stared with amazement and a growing sense of eerie horror at it.

"My God!" he gasped. "It's a statue of a Martian!"

He approached gingerly, and looked at it closely.

The figure was that of a spindly-legged, pipestem-armed, and barrel-torsoed creature, with a large head and popping eyes. It stood with one large splay hand over what was evidently a three-dimensional representation of the solar system. Cliff recognized the planets, and even saw a tenth planet where he knew the asteroid belt now to be.*

From the small ball that indicated Mars, a thin band of gray *anilum* ran to the tenth planet. And from Mars another ran to Earth.

Cliff's face suffused suddenly with rage.

"So that's it!" he shouted. "You murdering devils have done this damned trick once before. You've already smashed up one planet, and now, even after you're dead, you plan to smash up another—out of a long-forgotten revenge!"

* Science has long held that a planet once existed between the orbits of Mars and Saturn, where now there is only a belt of asteroids and small bits of rock and metal. By some mysterious catastrophe, it exploded, or was shattered, and through the ages, its bulk spread out thinly until now it forms a vast ring of fragments about the sun in the orbit of the former planet.—Ed.

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For a moment Cliff went berserk, and he charged upon the ugly figure of the Martian and hurled it to the metal floor with almost superhuman effort.

The statue fell with a crash, and to Cliff's utter amazement, it shattered into bits.

"It's not *anilum!*" he muttered in an awed voice. "It smashed like . . . like—"

He knelt and examined the shattered figure, and from the debris of it picked up a small whitish piece of bone. As he fingered it wonderingly, it crumbled in his hand, becoming a fine, whitish powder that drifted to the floor.

"Bone!" he exclaimed. "This wasn't a statue, it was the last Martian himself, perfectly preserved here in his own death-trap! And he was standing there, gloating, even as death came to him, over the vengeance that he had planned for a race that was not yet born!"

CLIFF kicked out suddenly with his foot, sending the fragments of the mummy skittering along the floor in all directions. He was sobbing with pure fury after a moment, and then he turned and stumbled away from the horror that he had discovered.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. TICK-TOCK. TICK-TOCK!

Interminably, on and on, the horrible ticking reverberated through the cavern, and Cliff fled from it, his hands over his ears.

"I can't stop it!" he moaned. "Not a thing I can do. Here I am, helpless, while that awful voltage prepares to launch itself at the Earth."

He sat down suddenly on a jagged piece of rock and sobbed like a baby. the reaction of his fear and terror and horror had finally set in. For some moments his frame shook with emotion, then gradually he quieted, and a grim look came to his face.

He sat for some time staring into the darkness; then he rose once more to his feet and strode determinedly back toward the big ball and the invulnerably protected pendulum.

"There must be a way," he whispered. "No science can be absolutely fool-proof. There's a way that any slightly clever engineer ought to be able to stop a simple pendulum from swinging. And I'll find that way! I'll find it before it's too late . . ."

But as he stared at the huge ball, he knew that he was indulging in wishful thinking. Perhaps there was a way, but it would take more than the few hours he had left to find it.

Just how much time *did* he have? He glanced at his watch and cursed. He had smashed it sometime during his wanderings through the cavern. As its hands stood now, he had only seven hours left when the watch was broken. He had somewhere between two and five hours left.

"That's too indefinite," he muttered apprehensively. "Even if I do find a way, maybe I won't have time to finish doing it."

He began a careful search over every inch of the ball, even piling up debris so he could get on top of it. Once he fell, sliding from the smooth ball, but he was able to rise once more to his feet, although he could scarcely stand on a twisted ankle. After that he crawled about on his hands and knees, inspecting the base of the ball, and trying to find an inlet cable that he could short-circuit.

There was nothing.

Despair seized him once more and he sat thinking.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock . . .

HE began to fancy that he heard whispering in the darkness about him and started and peered around search-

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ing for the author of the voice. But he could see no one.

"There's a way, Cliff," came a muted voice, s e e m i n g l y from far away. "There's a waaayyy."

Cliff was on his feet, trembling.

"Townshend!" he exclaimed. "Oh my God, I'm going mad!"

His own voice echoed back to him from the distant reaches of the cavern.

"Townshend—going mad . . . Townshend . . . mad . . . going . . oh my God . . ."

Cliff forgot his injured ankle and began to run, then cried out sharply as it gave beneath him, and he tumbled to the floor once more.

He sat up with an effort, and groaned.

All about him he seemed to hear whisperings, and he trembled violently. He got out his flash, and lit it, sending its bright beam casting about the cavern into every cranny of it, searching for the author of the voices that tortured him.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

For a time, in his growing madness, Cliff had become aware of the ticking of the pendulum, but now it beat back upon his consciousness like the blows of a giant hammer.

He screamed.

"I've *got* to stop it!" he shouted.

And the echoes shouted back,

"Stop it!—Stop it!—STOP IT!"

They become a thundering clamor of many voices, then died away.

Sobered by the tumult, Cliff became quiet, and his eyes cleared. Deliberately he swung the light about the cave.

"Yes," he muttered to h i m s e l f. "You're right . . ."

The beam from the flash caught a ball of *anilum* high overhead.

"Maybe that was the one that killed Richardson," said Cliff. A look of rage passed over his face. He sent the beam questing on. Down the walls of the cave, to the floor, littered with debris.

Then on to the giant ball, and beside it to—

The magnetizers!

THEN slowly an idea began to form in Cliff's tortured mind. His idle torch beam was focused quite unintentionally upon the massive bulk of the three magnetizers that had fallen from above in the explosion that had left him the sole survivor.

"X-rays passed through that ball . . ." he muttered. "Other radiations passed through because Townshend measured them on instruments. In that case, suppose I—?"

He jumped to his feet and raced over to the nearest magnetizer. Putting his shoulder against it he shoved and heaved with all his power. It stirred a little, finally righted itself. He stood back, panting, thanking Providence for the lesser attraction that had made his Herculean feat possible.

Without pause, perspiration streaming down his face and limbs, he shoved and heaved and levered the second machine into position, and then did the same with the third.

He was working to the last possible throw of the dice. If other radiations could pass through the globe from inside to outside, then the process could be reversed. Magnetism streaming from the giant horseshoes of the machines, trained on the pendulum inside the ball, should stop its swinging!

If that could be done the machine would be powerless. True, something might happen to the potential energy that would be released, but at least it wouldn't hit the Earth.

Cliff slammed home the generating switches on the first machine and listened intently. Over the drone of the dynamo the pendulum made a noticeable waver. It was obviously disturbed.

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There was a definite irregularity.

Cursing himself for a fool for not having thought of the thing before, he closed the switches on the second and third machines. The tripled stream of magnetism had an instant effect.

Cliff lived centuries in those seconds. The pendulum gave a sharp, strident tick, there was a long interval, then a solemn—tock.

Tick—Tock. Tick— Silence.

Dead silence expanding into seconds —minutes! It was a silence of infinity itself here in the bowels of Mars. But the pendulum had ceased to swing. The magnetism had counterweighted it. Cliff wanted to scream, to shout, to tell a planet forty million miles away that it was safe. But he had no way.

Thoughts flashed through his anguished mind. Trapped down here, valves shut, comrades gone, radio smashed—

He became tense. Strange noises were in the giant ball. Curious whirring noises. He stared at it in fascination as it turned a bright, glowing white. It became violet and he felt his skin blister with radiations.

A million pains stabbed through his eyes, slashed and tortured his body so that he dropped in gasping death at the foot of the defeated monster. . .

He never saw nor heard the globe as it exploded with colossal violence to release the energy it had so long stored up.

BUT they saw it on Earth, and felt it as the Earth reeled from a sudden gravitational change. The report that flashed round the world was ironic and coldly official to say the least of it.

"Severe Martian explosion has caused the planet to suffer almost complete disintegration. Remaining parts in state of collapse. Feared anilum *Expedition wiped out. The men engaged in same probably contacted an old volcanic seam. Rescue party leaving immediately.*

"Earth Bureau of Official Information."

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WORLD BENEATH ICE

FROM the distant reaches of space came a tiny planetoid, and the earth trembled. Then to Earth came an ice sheet of death

By POLTON CROSS

CHAPTER I
The Coming of Disaster

NEW YORK felt the initial tremor in the mid evening of January 6, 1990. It passed through the busy metropolis as a slight, creeping shudder: for a fraction of a second everything was a thirty-second of an inch out of true, then immediately righted itself again. Thousands failed to notice it, and those who did did not put it down to a temblor but to a physical disorder that had briefly thrown them out of key with their surroundings.

But the instruments at the Institute of Science were coldly impartial in their findings. There had definitely been an earth temblor across the whole American continent at 21 hours 14 minutes Eastern Standard Time—the period being registered from midnight to midnight. The curious thing was that the tremor was not one in the usually understood sense of the word, nor was there any t r a c e a b l e epicenter. Scientists looked at one another in baffled wonder, checked their seismographs again, then waited for reports to come in from their stations in various parts of the world.

An hour later they came through—and as they arrived it became perfectly obvious that not only America but all the world had experienced a temblor at almost the same time. And again there was the absence of a recognizable epicenter, presumably because the occurrence had been simultaneously world wide.

To the scientists the matter was one of profound interest, but to the world in general it meant nothing. The temblor had caused but little harm anyhow. Hardly a brick had been dislodged. Broken crockery seemed to be the only mishap, and that was relegated to the mysterious regions of domesticity. . . . So the people of the world in general and America in particular went on their way undisturbed.

Then, a week afterwards, the temblor came again! This time it was more violent. Several poorly constructed products of cheap labor in New York fell down entirely. A vast apartment block in the process of construction buckled up in its entirety and killed two hundred workmen outright. In Britain and Europe, too, the effect had been unusually severe.

That started people noticing their newspapers and listening to their radio-television reports. With a typical sensationalism the papers carried a unanimous headline—

THE TEMBLOR STRIKES AGAIN!

Strange how editors and reporters got

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into the habit of regarding the thing from a human aspect. They plugged it for all it was worth, traced vague histories of past earthquakes with a certain pitiful fervidness. Scientists stood up before telescreens and spoke in deep, learned voices on the hundred and one causes of an earthquake. . . . But it was increasingly plain that all of them were hedging, did not really know what they were grappling with.

And the one man who could have explained the thing from A to Z remained silent, determined to have every fact before he published his opinions to a much bewildered world.

THE one man was Dr. Royston Shaw, with enough degrees after his name to fill half a column of type in "Who's Who in Science." Coldly eschewing all the benefits scientific bodies would have thrust upon him, he had retired at 50 to study out certain angles in science that still baffled his relentlessly analytical mind.

With a fortune at his disposal, a quiet home just clear of the busy whirl and din of New York City, a daughter of 25 whose heart was also given over to things scientific, and an understanding wife whose only vice was the rearing of goldfish in numberless bowls, he had little to do but pursue his sole interest in life. And pursue he did, to the virtual exclusion of all else.

Ann Shaw was the first to notice her father's sudden increase in endeavor at the arrival of the first earth temblor—but she could get little out of him as he sat like a gnome before his desk in the laboratory, gold rimmed glasses perched on his beaky nose, one hand incessantly clawing at the skimpy gray hair falling over his high forehead. With his free hand he made innumerable notes and drawings on a thick pad: then he would vanish into his observatory for hours at a stretch and come back to make more notes, or meditate.

Ann gave it up at last, she knew he would come out with the whole story when he was ready. Besides, there was nothing for her to do while he was in one of these moods; so, being a perfectly normal girl even if she was a brilliant scientist, Ann took herself off to the nearby city to catch up on some much needed shopping.

She was in the heart of the city wher the third temblor came. In fact she was stepping out of a dress shop when a growling roar smote on her ears. The next moment her feet were shaken from under her and she went her length in the gutter on top of her parcels. For a few seconds the ground heaved horribly to the accompaniment of distant concussions and splintering glass. Then the world was still again.

Dazed, she started to get to her feet, found a strong hand on her arm assisting her. She glanced up in surprise to find a man of massive proportions in a big fawn overcoat and soft hat regarding her in concern.

"O.K.?" he asked, smiling, picking up her parcels.

"Yes—yes, thanks." She brushed the dirt from her clothes with an impatient hand. "I—I guess I made an exhibition of myself."

"So did the others," he said quietly, and nodded along the sidewalk to the men and women picking themselves up. Police cars were already screaming down the thoroughfare answering emergency calls. The dress shop window was smashed and mixed with costly gowns which had been slashed to ribbons.

Ann rearranged her parcels carefully, taking a sly look at her acquaintance as she did so. He was younger than she had thought—perhaps in the early thirties. Blond too—handsomely blond. Ripples of fair hair showed at the side

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of his hat. His face was fresh complexioned, very strongly moulded, with a projecting chin, firm lips and straight nose. Even his eyes were arresting—of a bright blue usually associated with young children and china dolls.

Not that he was idle as he helped with the parcels. He had already taken account of Ann's trim, shapely figure, black hair, and level gray eyes.

"That's the third quake we've had now, isn't it?" Ann asked rather breathlessly, becoming aware of the mutual scrutiny when the parcels were no longer an excuse.

"Yeah. . . ." He still did not take his blue eyes off her. Then he suddenly grinned with the whitest of teeth. "I'm Radford Blake of the *Star*," he volunteered. "Hope you don't mind?"

"Oh! A reporter?" Ann stiffened visibly.

"Sure—and a good one too. Ask the *Star*. I rate by-lines in my write ups, and that's something. Besides— Hey, just a minute!" He streaked after the girl as she suddenly turned away. Catching up with her he clasped her arm. "Am I that bad?" he asked in reproach.

"I just don't like reporters, that's all," she answered sweetly. "Thank you for helping me—and now good by!"

AGAIN she turned away but by the time she had reached the subway entrance she was aware of his powerful, grinning face once more. He raised his hat politely and the blond hair came fully into evidence.

"Hallo there! Remember me?"

Ann stopped, her face set. "Now listen, Mr. Blake, you're getting to be a nuisance! I suppose it's the reporter in you that makes you behave like a bloodhound—but remember that picking a girl up after she's fallen down doesn't give you the right to follow her around. Anyway what *do* you want?" she demanded.

"Your name, and the date and place of our next meeting."

"What!" Ann's gray eyes opened wide.

"Sure!" he smiled. "Oh, be yourself, won't you? This is 1990 and the age of self-expression. I think you're all right, and I'd like to know more about you. In return I promise you a full history of my life from the cradle upward."

"From the amoeba upward would be more apt!" she retorted.

He winced. "O.K.—you win. Well, where do we meet?"

For answer she brought her dainty heel down on his toe with savage vigor: it was the only alternative to a slap in the face she could think of. By the time he had finished hopping around amid the grinning people, the girl had vanished. In fact, she had already boarded the subway train for home and was sitting in a corner seat smiling to herself. It flattered the woman in her to have the blond giant's name and occupation while withholding her own.

She was still smiling when she returned into the house—then as her mother came fluttering round with allusions to an earth tremor she suddenly forgot all about Radford Blake and recalled her experience in the city. Immediately she headed for the laboratory and found her father pacing slowly up and down in his tattered smock, thrashing back his gray hair impatiently.

"Well, about time!" He wheeled round irritably as she came in. "I was wondering where you'd gotten to, Ann. Your mother tells me you've been up town. How much damage was there?"

"Why, not much. It was only a tremor, after all. A few windows broken and one or two people hurt. I was thrown in the gutter. Nothing else so

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far as I could see at the time."

Shaw's brows came down over his cold eyes.

"Ann," he said slowly, "the next tremor will be the last. And it will bring about the complete end of civilization! It will not be just a shiver, but a gigantic quake which will destroy in a few seconds everything man has built up."

THE girl gave a faint, incredulous smile.

"Don't believe me, eh?" her father asked, jamming his hands in his smock pockets and staring at her. "I'm surprised at you, Ann, I thought I had developed the scientific streak in you. Leave disbelief for the masses: that's their job. All that I'm saying is true—unhappily. I've come to the end of my researches now, and I realize that at any moment the end may come. These recent tremors link up completely with the sudden distension of Jupiter's Red Spot."

Ann slowly sat down, frowning. "But, dad, how do—"

"I've been watching the planets for some time now," he interrupted. "First Uranus revealed an extensive white spot growing gradually larger: then Jupiter's Red Spot extended some thousands of miles beyond normal bounds—then we got temblors on earth here, each one more severe. Only one thing could cause the strange distensions on Uranus and Jupiter—namely, a tremendous gravitational field tugging from outer space, shifting the gummy half molten plasma of the Red Spot as a—a spoon would drag molasses. Understand?"

"Yes—yes, I think so. Go on."

"I explored space with my instruments." Shaw paced up and down now as he talked. "I couldn't find anything to account for a strong gravity field. Yet I knew it must be present *somewhere*. In the end I arrived at its position by mathematics."

He came to a stop, took a deep breath.

"Out in space, Ann, passing rapidly through our solar system, is a tiny piece of a white dwarf star—a black fragment, utterly invisible, detectable only by mathematics. Possibly it is a piece broken off a white dwarf in the far depths of space by some inconceivable disaster, and following a certain orbit it is passing through our part of the universe. I say it is tiny, but the packing of a white dwarf is something like two tons to the cubic inch. It has a density two thousand times greater than platinum. The substance is composed entirely of neutrons. There are no normal atoms at all—"

"In other words, the stuff is neutronium," Ann said quietly.

"Exactly—neutronium. Now, it is passing through our system. Its great gravity field is not strong enough to drag an entire planet out of its orbit: it cannot defeat the master field of the sun. But it does something else! Even as in the normal way the moon raises tides in the fluid oceans, so this neutronium chunk raises and shifts the plasma of the earth's surface, as a magnet would drag along steel filings. When it reaches its closest point, which may be any time now, all normal land surface will be shattered. Everything will collapse."

"But why, dad? Isn't that a bit sweeping?"

"Believe me, child, I wish I were wrong. But there it is, I'm not. In fact, the major earthquake would have come long ago were it not for the fact that the earth's surface is somewhat adhesive. Continents cling together by cohesion of molecules until at last the pull of the opposing gravity is too strong to be denied. Then rupture will come all at once. Three times so far the surface

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of the world has slipped simultaneously. The next time will be the last. As you probably know, the earth's surface is not solid: that's the trouble. It floats, as though it were heated tar or treacle."

"Isn't that the Wegener Hypothesis?" Ann asked, thinking.

"Yes. Wegener perished long ago in Greenland trying to prove the hypothesis that we now accept as fact—namely, that all continents and islands are really hardened scum or pumice floating on the hot viscid stuff that makes up earth's interior. And continents not only float: they drift. . . .* So when this strong gravitative field approached from outside the surface began to accelerate its rate of drift to the extent of finally ripping in pieces. That has yet to come. I am convinced nothing can stop it."

Shaw fell silent, pondering, his eyes on the floor. At length Ann looked up sharply.

"I presume nobody else knows about this chunk of neutronium?"

"Don't see how they can. It's invisible—and I don't know many who could compute the mathematics to find it as I have, even if they had the imagination to know what to look for in the first place."

THE girl got to her feet suddenly, took hold of her father's arm tightly.

"Dad, do you begin to realize what you've discovered?" she whispered. "Why—it means world catastrophe! And you just stand there and tell me! Everybody's got to know about it as quickly as possible. Preparations have got to be made for defense against the disaster. Underground refuges, perhaps."

"There isn't time," Shaw said moodily looking at her.

"There's got to be time! It's—unthinkable!" Ann swung round to the telephone and searched through the directory, finally dialled a number. Her father stood watching, meditating.

"Oh, is this the Star?" she asked at length. "Give me Radford Blake—and hurry!"

"Who's Blake?" Shaw asked suspiciously.

"Reporter I know. He'll start the ball rolling for the press, anyway: then we'll contact the radio stations— Oh, hello! Is that Mr. Blake? Remember the girl you picked up from the gutter?"

Shaw's eyes opened a little wider, but he said nothing, stood listening to his daughter's words.

". . . of course not. This is business! Come right away to Dr. Shaw's home—East Dale, 79th Precinct. It's desperately important. Eh? No, I am *not* kidding. Fifteen minutes? O. K."

"Who exactly is this fellow?" Shaw demanded, as she put back the receiver.

"From now on he'll be your mouthpiece for the press. I know you don't like the general run of reporters, but Blake's different. He'll get everything fixed as it should be. Wait till you see him. . . ." Ann sighed a little. "You know, dad, I still can't half credit this thing. Are you dead certain that the earth is about to end?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, my dear, I am. I've thought of many ways for the world to end, but never this one."

* The Wegener Hypothesis further assumes that the oceans are carried in heavy basins of basalt and that the continents are borne on wracks of granite. First glance at the map of the entire Atlantic reveals much in favor of this theory. Faced with those two coastlines it is not impossible to imagine that the West African coast and east South American coast once fitted up against each other. Turn the atlas further west. It is odd that both North and South America should have a rumple of mountains—Rockies and Andes—rucking up along their western sides, as though the plains to the east of them had "crept" as tarmac creeps to the curb on a heated road. The general tendency it seems is for these gigantic rock floes to drift in a westerly direction, which may mean that Antarctica was once in a tropic zone. From Gerald Heard's *Science & Life*.—Author.

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"This neutronium chunk— What will happen to it finally?"

"I'm not altogether sure, but so far as I can make out it will pass on its way through our solar system into the depths of space."

Ann shrugged, went slowly to the window. Night had fallen now and she gazed across the intervening fields to the vision of New York with its lighted beacon summits scraping the cloudy sky. New York, the whole continent of America, every continent in the world, at the breaking point—waiting to obey the masterful urge of an invisible unthinkably heavy rock in the depths of space. Fantastic! Incredible! With everything so solid and impregnable. How was it possible for the creations of man to be razed to the dust?

IN that almost completely silent fifteen minutes Ann's mind went swiftly over Man's career—his laborious rise from slime to supremacy over the whims of Nature. Forever climbing upwards, slipping many a time, but now well on the road to sublime achievement. Only to meet up with this facet of nature that had no controller.

"Dad," she said slowly, gazing through the window still, "I wonder if this neutronium chunk has ever been near us before?"

"Does it matter?" he asked quietly.

"It might. For instance it might give a clue to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the reason for the Deluge, explain why the Sphinx and Pyramids are in the middle of inaccessible desert. A floating world surface attacked by neutronium drag in the past could explain all the transfers of land to parts unexpected and also might show why past civilizations came to such sudden endings. There might even have really been El Dorado, Inca people, and Heaven knows what."

"Maybe you're right," Shaw admitted, wrinkling his brow—then whatever he intended to say was not realized for at that moment the laboratory door opened to admit Radford Blake, preceded by the man-servant.

"Well, here I am—all of me!" Blake took off his hat and held out his hand genially as the girl went forward.

"Catch your subway train all right?" he asked naively.

"This is business, Mr. Blake," she returned curtly. "Meet my father, Dr. Shaw."

"Oh, yes—the scientist. Glad to know you, sir."

Shaw shook hands rather indifferently. It was plain he was still suspicious of reporters, and this massive specimen in particular.

"According to my daughter Ann, Mr. Blake, you will be interested in the positive certainty of world destruction, will you not?" he asked briefly.

"World destruction!" Blake's eyes opened wide and he gulped a little. "*Interested?* I'll say! Why, what's coming up? More earth temblors, or something?"

"Not a temblor, young man—a quake. *The* quake! Now, here are the main facts—"

"Wait a minute!" Ann broke in suddenly, her voice hard and tense. "Listen! What's that?"

The three of them stood motionless, aware of a deep rumbling roar from somewhere apparently far beneath their feet. The laboratory began to quiver with gradually increasing force. Glass instruments began to tinkle against their stands.

"Sounds like a subsidence of sorts," Blake breathed finally.

"It's the Quake!" Shaw snapped back, tight lipped.

Then Ann leaped to the window. Sheer amazement held her speechless for

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a moment, but she was aware of Blake and her father looking over her shoulders.

New York was falling! Shattering from top to bottom in a myriad blinding flashes of light as electricity became rampant and ripped along crumbling steel girders. Masonry, bricks, lights, flames—everything was a tumbling agglomeration to the accompaniment of a thundering growl like the onrush of an express train.

Within seconds the roar caught up with the laboratory. The floor heaved and pitched wildly. Instruments fell over. The light went out. Ann screamed hysterically as she felt herself flying into ebon darkness. She collided with something that sent a blinding pain through her arm and neck —

CHAPTER II

Reconstruction

ANN drifted slowly back to consciousness with the awareness of an excruciatingly hurtful arm and shoulder. She felt hot, feverish. Slowly she opened her eyes, realized that it was still night—but a night such as she had never expected to behold. The lowering, drifting clouds were painted with the flickering red of a million fires. The smell of burning drifted acridly to her nostrils: the heavy, strangely mournful silence was pierced in the far distance by a medley of hoots, siren screeches, desperate human cries and dull concussions.

She tried to move, could not for the agony of her arm. She moistened her dry lips and called weakly.

Immediately the tattered, blood-streaked figure of Rad Blake appeared beside her. She saw his strong face set into grim, hard lines. He was no longer the smiling and impudent reporter.

"Fa—father . . ." Ann faltered, staring up at him. "Where is he? And mother?"

He knelt down beside her, looked into her face with serious eyes.

"You may as well have the truth now as later, Ann," he said quietly. "The laboratory came down in ruins. Somehow I got you out, but you've got a broken collar bone and arm— No, no, don't try to move. I was waiting for you to recover consciousness before taking you to the city. Your father and mother and the servants— Well, they're . . ."

"Dead?" the girl whispered, and her eyes misted with a hot flood of tears.

"There are the ruins," he said moodily, nodding to a great pile of crumbled masonry. "All that's left of the lab and house— It's the end of the world. Ann—the end of everything man ever built up. We've got to face that as best we can."

She did not speak, only burst suddenly into tears. A million thoughts were slamming through her tired, pain ridden brain. Catastrophe, colossal beyond all imagination had swept the earth. Her parents gone, her home shattered, civilization at an end. And the future?

She felt herself being lifted suddenly into Rad's great arms. He held her tenderly, firmly, taking infinite care of her injured shoulder.

"Looks like you're going to keep that date with me after all," he said, grinning faintly through his sweat and dirt. "Take it easy, Ann: just rely on me. I'm tough enough to carry a dozen of your weight. I'm taking you to the city—or what's left of it, anyway."

Then he started to walk, steadily, his big blond head outlined against the crimson sky. Ann lay passive, biting her lip so that no utterance of pain

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should escape her. And little by little they began to near the smoking, flaming inferno that had been the pride of the Americas.

ONLY an observer on another planet could possibly have gauged the extent of the disaster that had hit Earth in the space of a few short minutes.

The plasmic upper surface, drawn to breaking point by the invisibly neutronium fragment computed by the dead Royston Shaw had at last ruptured. In that horrible moment the whole surface of the earth was tugged round like a loose skin on a bladder. Cities dropped instantly all over the world. Mountains rolled down to the plains, new ones reared up amidst colossal thunders. Volcanoes roared their hellish augmentation to the horror. Tidal waves, drawn by the gravity of the invader at its closest approach, and spilled too by the vast surface changes, roared in solid hundred foot walls over shattered continents. It was the most frightful onslaught the world had ever known. Within the space of perhaps an hour the population of the world was reduced to a third.

In the western hemisphere at least a cold gray dawn revealed a scene of incredible havoc. No war, no diabolical contrivance of man, could have been so all encompassing. Hardly a building was left standing in New York City. Ruins everywhere — crumbled, heart breaking ruins — with the survivors staggering about half demented in their midst.

But such an adaptable animal is Man there began to grow a certain order out of chaos. What had happened in other parts of the world it was then impossible to say: to Ann and Rad the world was New York. Through ways and means they could not afterwards quite recall they found themselves domiciled by troops in one of the few big buildings still standing. There, as best they could, they tried to exist, at least while Ann had medical attention.

Through the ensuing weeks she began to mend steadily. In fact she mended far more quickly once she realized that sorrow for her dead parents was a useless quantity. With a brave smile on her lips she turned to face the new, grim future that had been thrust upon her.

It was during the period of respite that she and Rad, along with everybody else, became the observers of a sudden cycle of terrific electrical storms. They came without rhyme or reason—hours of blinding lightning and stunning thunder. Then they would vanish with curious suddenness to reveal the blue sky. Nobody seemed to have the least idea what it was all about: even Ann with her scientific knowledge was at a loss, unless the storms were the outcome of the Quake.

When they finally ceased and the normal winter returned they were entirely forgotten. Ann and Rad moved on from their confined quarters in the big building and finally took over a solitary wreck of a house to the south of the city. It had no pretensions to comfort. It was mainly one old drawing room, the windows blocked up with boards, the door a little hole at the bottom of the wall. But it was a home—of sorts. And they had candles from the city, and a good supply of smashed beams to make a fire. Yes, it was passable.

"Funny thing, Ann," Rad had said one day, as they sat eating the tinned food he had frisked with some difficulty from the city, "you and I are stuck here just as though we're married . . . I've often wondered if you mind?"

The girl smiled a little, drew her tattered clothing more tightly round her

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against the cutting winter drafts.

"Circumstances alter cases, Rad. You've been wonderfully good to me and I appreciate it. I'm sorry now for the way I treated you when we first met."

"Aw, forget it. I was fresh, anyway. . ."

SHE ate in silence for a while, thinking. Then, "What are the folks doing in the city? Anything?"

"Building," he muttered. "That was bound to come. But there is something else with it that I don't like. Out of a disaster like this there emerges a distinct tendency to go totalitarian, like so many of the European states before the Quake. It's only natural. We've got to have a leader, and in their present state of mind the people are listening to Saxby West. And can he hand them words!"

"Saxby West!" Ann echoed. "The former big labor boss?"

"The same—and he's still a labor boss, with more power than ever. Remember how he used to spout about the crumbling foundations of democracy? Well right now he's having a field day, and unless somebody opposes him he'll wind up as a dictator of the country . . . and his rule won't be exactly—pleasant."

Ann meditated. As she well knew a man like Saxby West would inevitably become a tyrant if he gained control over the struggling country. That control he might easily achieve through the influence of his name alone. It had stood pre-emiently for labor and totalitarianism before the Quake. Right now, with the masses in his skilful hands . . .

"Suppose," Ann said absently, "you oppose him?"

"Me!" Rad stared blankly. "Damn it all, Ann, what chance would I stand against—"

"Plenty of chances!" Her gray eyes became suddenly keen as she looked across the rough table. "You're a hundred per cent American, you have a commanding appearance, especially with that long blond hair and yellow beard. You've got the physical power to assert yourself; you can talk by the ream."

"In fact, I'm a mighty nice feller," he grinned.

"I'm not trying to flatter you, Rad: I'm just stating facts—checking up on your assets, if you prefer it. Another thing, you know what caused the Quake: I've already told you the story dad had no time to give. That will give you a starting point with the people. . . . You can also reassure them that the horror will never come again, that the invader, the neutronium, has gone on its way forever—as long as our lifetimes are concerned anyway. Last of all, you're a democrat, and as such you're closer to the heart of most Americans than Saxby West is."

"Say, maybe you've got something there, Ann." For a long time Rad sat pondering, tugging his square yellow beard. Then he looked up anxiously. "I suppose that neutronium chunk *has* gone forever? I'd be in a frightful spot if it came back after all my assurances."

"But of course it's gone! Dad said it would pass right out of our system. If it ever does come back it will be so far in the future we don't need to worry over it."

"Then—maybe—I could do something," Rad mused. "Trouble is, I would need the dickens of a knowledge to take over a crumbled world."

"Not a bit of it. You have plenty of ordinary knowledge—must have from your writing experiences. If you became dictator men in specialized fields would rally round you. And if it's science you need sometimes you always

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have me. I know a thing or two about it, remember. Rad, I'm sure you could do it—if you wanted."

He reached out across the table, clasped her slim fingers in his big hand. "That's all I need," he whispered. "If you believe in it to that extent it can be done. They'll make Radford Blake their leader, and like it!"

For a long time afterwards they sat making plans, forming new ideas. Somehow, the future no longer seemed so black.

RAD BLAKE'S campaign gave both him and Ann something to live for in the slowly regrowing city of New York. Day by day, throughout that bitter winter, the girl accompanied him on his tours of the ruins, sat by him as he stood and talked to the people in the shelter of crumbled edifices and held forth on the advantages of democracy and the law of freedom for every individual.

And little by little he made headway. People began to take notice of the blond giant with the flowing beard, and of the quiet girl who rarely made a comment. He was obviously sincere—even to the point of using his sledgehammer fists where necessary. Besides, had he not formed numberless men and women's clubs, organized new relief systems, put down a great deal of the looting and rape and murder that had followed the Quake? Was he not, in truth, a great warrior and pioneer breathing the spirit of the Americas? And did he not believe that every man, woman or child should have the right to pass an opinion?

Definitely! And Saxby West found his own campaign boomeranging upon him. His dictator ideals were not nearly so attractive as Rad Blake's democratic promises. West's fond dream of a totalitarian country and easy riches began to fade gradually. Despairing, he did away with fair methods and tried all underhand methods to be rid of Blake. But he failed: Blake watched and defeated every move.

By the early Spring of 1991, when New York was forming into a recognizable city again and other cities on the continent were starting to sprout from dead ashes, it became obvious that Radford Blake was going to be the undisputed master of America.

By the month of May he had achieved his ambition—gone far along the road from the drafty hovel where he and Ann had first debated the idea. In the intervening time his powers of speech had bound together the vast majority of people in a common loyalty: he had instituted laws for the country that were generally acceptable, had done away with all suggestions of a Congress. Certainly he was a dictator—but a democratic one, and therein lay the difference. He was the first in history. But history—and geography—had to be written anyway.

June, 1991, found him officially elected Dictator by an overwhelming majority over Saxby West. West took the defeat with a bitter smile on his lean, cruel face. Rad knew, deep down, that if the slightest chance ever arose he would be smashed from power with ruthless savagery. West still had a following: by a rigid campaign of mind poisoning he might finally swing the balance over in his favor. But that was in the future.

The occupation of a master building in the heart of New York, with Ann, now his wife, by his side, was by no means the end of the road for Rad Blake. Now he had gained the position he had to consolidate it, bend his own and the girl's knowledge entirely to the task of reconstructing the totally shattered scale of balances that had existed

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before the Quake—a scale that had been badly in need of leveling anyway.

He had the advantage of clever men and women with initiative as his immediate circle of advisers. They helped with the real eagerness of men and women anxious to see their country dominate the world again. They toiled and labored on the schemes of Blake and Ann, saw New York in the space of another year grow to something of its old giantism. Other cities were grown up again too. Roads networked the continent once more: radio stations were back: sanitation, power, railway, and air were once more commercialized. The contact with distant rebuilt parts of the earth began again.

Blake, still bearded, the massive and genial master of it all, had reason to be proud of his efforts, and of the slim, capable girl by his side—

Then came the shadow—out of a clear sky of progress.

CHAPTER III

The Ice Will Come!

IT STARTED with the curious coldness of the Spring of 1993, a coldness that dragged on until early June, with the consequence that the crops so necessary as staple foods for the needs of a newly organized mankind were far below par. Already America and other countries were beginning to feel the shortage. Nor was the summer, when it did finally come, particularly helpful. There were night frosts to add further ruination.

The reason was obvious enough. Blake and Ann had the astronomers on the job immediately and within a week they sent in their spectroheliograph plates and bolometer readings, together with masses of notes. Sunspots were at the back of the trouble—a rather abnormal number of them, just at the close of their usual 11-year cycle. Nothing to worry about, except that their unusual prevalence was blanketing the sun's radiation and creating abnormally cold weather.

Blake and Ann were both satisfied with the explanation for the time being—but the fall of 1993 brought not a cessation of the spots but an increase. Throughout America and the world there went a grumble of alarm. This was not according to astronomical law. . . Food was short. The land was getting frozen long before its time and a long deadly winter loomed ahead. What was to be done about it?

Saxby West was not slow to see the opportunity either. His agents went to work, stressed the fact that, as a scientist, Dictator Blake should have foreseen this cosmic trouble and made due preparation for it. Not much of an argument perhaps, but West was clever. He knew human psychology. The peoples of America, paying fantastic prices for their foodstuffs and heating materials were just in the mood to listen to the first honeyed breath of totalitarian promises.

Facing another set of plates and readings, wading through the mass of information supplied by the astronomers, Blake began to see he was facing something he had never bargained for.

"It's—it's so ridiculous!" he expostulated to Ann, as she stood at the great office window staring down over night-bound New York. "Why should the sun suddenly decide to have an extra supply of spots at this very time? And spots that continually grow larger?"

At that she turned. Her face was set and serious as though an inner thought was disturbing her. He quiet gray eyes looked at the plates, at the unpleasant vision of the sun's photosphere blotched with cancerous dark markings, some of

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them even reaching to the solar poles.

"Rad," she said slowly, "I believe we're up against it in real earnest this time. Not only us—but all the world! It's the aftermath of that neutronium chunk. . . I've been thinking things over, and the points hang together so well it frightens me. Frightens me to think what is going to happen."

"I don't get you," Rad said shortly, glancing up at her.

"I believe," she answered pensively, "that that neutronium chunk did *not* continue into space as dad had expected: it fell *into the sun!* That would be when those electrical storms struck us. Remember? We couldn't figure out the reason for them. After all, it is quite logical to assume that that chunk would fall in the sun. It was not moving fast enough to achieve an orbit round the primary, so it was drawn into it instead. It would automatically fall to the center. Since also it had not at any time the individual power to shift a planet, its gravity field added to that of the sun's would not make any planet alter its position in space. The sun's pull would be increased, yes—but not sufficiently to make any visible difference."

"What's all this got to do with sunspots?" Rad demanded.

"Everything. The presence of that white dwarf in the sun's interior would produce drastic changes. For one thing the internal temperature would rise enormously, and that very happening would spell disaster. Our sun is a main sequence star of the G-type.* If, as now seems inevitable, the sun's interior heat has enormously increased it means that atoms no longer exist—there is an ever spreading inner field of free electrons and nuclei. These will finally contract into a compressed mass—the state of—of a white dwarf."

"You . . . you don't mean *our* sun is turning into a white dwarf?" Rad asked haltingly.

Ann slowly nodded. "Yes, Rad—I do."

"But—but why?"

"The sunspots are the visible sign of collapse—and the more they spread the nearer the disaster comes. All the time now, the sun, with its vastly increased internal heat, is contracting also. The radiation cannot get through the increasing density of solid matter piling up. The sun is slowly closing up, squeezing inwards on all sides, until ultimately the whole photosphere will be one colossal spot and will cave in. Then the sun will be a white dwarf."

"For all time?" Rad whispered unbelievingly.

"For all time." Ann stood staring straight in front of her. For three minutes there was not a sound in the room save the relentless ticking of the electric clock.

"Strange," Rad said at last, "that the astronomers have not come forward with the same theory. They *must* know. . ."

"You can be sure of it," Ann nodded. "They probably do not know the cause because their knowledge of that neutronium chunk is rather limited—but they do know effects. All of them must realize in their innermost hearts that the sun is dying."

Rad got suddenly to his feet, ran a hand through his thick hair.

"We must make preparations, Ann! People must go underground. The whole world must know what's coming. We'll have to start all over again."

"It won't be as easy as all that, Rad. Saxby West has been waiting for a chance like this to turn the people against us. Unless I judge him entirely

*A G-type star is one in which the atoms are still surrounded by their K-rings of electrons while the exterior rings have been shattered by the tremendous heat.—Author.

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wrong he will say that you got into power under false pretenses, knowing all the time that that neutronium would land in the sun and produce this trouble. . . Not only have we to keep the people beside us but we have to combat his totalitarian crusading as well. As the days grow darker and colder, so will his power increase."

"Then what do we do? Keep quiet?"

"We can't do that. Explanations are long overdue. No; we've got to trust to the loyalty of the people."

BUT loyalty has its limits, particularly when harried by increasing elemental terror and growing cold. With perfect frankness—but not a little inner uneasiness—Blake had the truth about the sunspots published for America and all the world to see. How the rest of the world took it was not his concern: his immediate worry was his own country.

Men and women were stunned into disbelief at first, could not credit that they had escaped one world disaster only to walk into another of even greater and more durable magnitude. Most of them believed there was an error somewhere, that the sunspots would go. But they did not go.

By the mid winter of 1994 the sun had visibly lost its normal brilliance. The spots covered its disk in a brown, almost unbroken cloud. Cold such as mankind had never known descended on the earth. Evacuation from northerly latitudes began. Vast multitudes of refugees flocked into frost bitten America, struggling against blizzard hurricanes.

Rad Blake was facing a desperate situation. Food could only be brought to the Americans by men of superhuman strength and bravery, men who were willing to pilot their fast air machines over freezing oceans and through a deepening twilight. And even when the food came it was insufficient. More often than not the planes crashed. Food was a mighty problem, ranking equal with the task of building titanic underground shelters for the people that they might find a haven when the surface became unsupportable for life.

Possibly Rad's schemes would have succeeded had it not been for the activity of Saxby West. He rose to a sudden peak of campaigning genius and lectured to the frost bitten, starving millions. He denounced Rad Blake as a traitor, as a blunderer who should have foreseen this second disaster. He —West—had known all along that it was coming, could even now save the world if he were given power.

Weary and hopeless, the millions of America began to listen to him and his agents. He had the burning fervor of the idealist. There was rocklike resolution in every utterance he made.

And February 1994 found Rad Blake with a revolution on his hands just when he most urgently needed cooperation. True, there were thousands of loyal far seeing democrats who backed him to the last, stood shoulder to shoulder manning instruments of war in an endeavor to protect what they believed was the only possible form of government. But gallantly though they fought they were outnumbered by the hungry myriads under West's control.

Blood stained the fast deepening snows of the Americas. Cannon, ray gun, and bomb tore the approaching glaciers asunder. The democracy of Rad Blake smashed in a thousand pieces. He and Ann came out of a whirl of struggle and carnage to find Saxby West triumphant with a demoralized, gasping people at his heels.

AFTER a month in power, in which time he had formulated plans ex-

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clusively his own, West sent for Rad Blake and his wife. He couldn't resist a slow, gloating smile creeping over his hatchet face as they stood before his desk.

"I always knew it was wrong for you to have control, Blake," he said softly, leaning over the desk. "You're not the type—too soft hearted. The masses need an iron hand."

Rad shrugged. "I'm not concerned for myself right now, West: I merely did what I thought was right for the good of the people. And you must do likewise! They need help more than ever now. Our ideals are different, of course, but we're both motivated by a common purpose—that of housing mankind underground."

"I know that, Blake—but at least the people will not find my methods quite so expensive as yours! Your estimate of $7,000,000 for each shelter was positively fantastic. I can do it for $1,000,000 and with labor thrown in. In fact I'll conscript labor for the purpose."

Rad glanced quickly at his startled wife, then back to the coldly smiling Dictator.

"Say, wait a minute! What the devil are you going to use for the shelters for them to be that cheap?"

"Reinforced steel. That's all that's necessary. Unlike you, my friend, I do not propose to use a cheap alloy and call it a new discovery, thereby pocketing some five of the seven million dollars left from the estimates."

Blake controlled himself with difficulty. He moved forward slowly, rested his clenched fists on the desk and stared into West's sardonic eyes.

"Now get this, West— My estimate for those shelters was exact, and showed no profit. I was dealing with human lives, and the only way to make dependable shelters was to use *alcazite*, the new metal my chemists devised the moment we knew this trouble was coming. It is the only existent metal which will stand up to a pressure of four and a half million tons to the square inch—and that's what the ice will weigh before we're through. But the stuff's costly. Don't you realize, man, that reinforced steel will buckle up like plywood? You'll kill everybody! You can't do it!"

"I've been in the steel industry all my life, and I know what it can do," West answered, with unshakeable calm. "I don't need stuff like *alcazite*. Besides, your chemists were democrats—still are, I understand. That rules them out entirely."

"What you really mean," Blake said slowly, "is that you plan to use steel *in place* of *alcazite*. It looks identical anyway, and since all your engineers will be totalitarians they'll keep quiet. You will betray every living soul into a series of death traps so you can pocket the profits. Naturally you will use steel at *alcazite* price and leave the figure unchanged. Then you and your overfat financial hordes will absorb the profits, all of you too damned dense to realize that you're signing your own death warrants and that not a red cent will ever come your way."

West shrugged. "What I choose to do, Blake, is entirely my own concern—not yours. I may as well tell you that I do not believe this rubbish about sunspots anyway. They'll clear—I'm sure of it. And steel will stand up to the job for shelters. It's been used for underground bores before—"

"But never under such terrific pressures!"

"And so it will stand up to this," West went on, ignoring the interruption. "When the spots clear and the earth returns to normal only one thing will dominate the world—money! I shall have that. I can dominate the earth."

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"I tell you it means world death!" Rad shouted desperately.

"In any case it won't concern you," West retorted. "I have already made my plans for all democrats. Altogether there are some three thousand of them imprisoned here, taking up room. To kill them all would demand too much time and too much power. I have decided on the other method—exile. Exile to the polar wastes, there to die. . . . And you and your wife, as leaders of that party, will go first. Within a week. The rest will follow. You will send in remote controlled airplanes with insufficient fuel for a return trip—and no food. The airplanes will be useless for the future in any case, so they may as well serve a useful final purpose."

Blake straightened up very slowly, smiling bitterly. He put a huge arm around Ann's shoulder.

"All right," he said at last. "It's about what could be expected from scum like you anyway. Go ahead—We've been through too much to be afraid now. Eh, Ann?"

She nodded quickly, but not very convincingly.

"Such heroics," West murmured dryly, and pressed the button at his elbow.

CHAPTER IV

Marooned in the Arctic

SAXBY WEST carried out his ruthless plan to the full. Unable to raise a finger to help themselves, Rad and Ann, a week later, were lifted into the cabin of a powerful two-seater plane, were bound to their seats before the remote controlled switches. Nobody save the mechanics was present to see them off. The cabin door slammed shut upon them and within minutes the dimly lighted snow crusted expanse of New York began to recede from them.

Throughout most the journey northwards they sat tusselling and struggling with their bonds, were too much occupied in using their teeth on one anothers' knots to take much notice of the exterior. They only realized that a white, glimmer-lit world was speeding past below them.

By the time the plane finally landed on a colossal ice plateau a night of starlit darkness had apparently descended. Certainly they were free at last—but to what use? No fuel in the tanks, no food. Water yes—from the ice outside.

Rad gave a twisted smile as he checked over the instruments, rubbed his chilled hands. Finally he tugged open the door of the clothing locker and gazed in some surprise on two suits of Arctic furs.

"Well, evidently West has a sense of humor!" he commented dryly, pulling them forth and handing one to Ann.

"Or more likely the mechanics who sent us off have more humanity than he has," she answered, scrambling into the grateful, furry warmth. "Food they couldn't manage—too difficult, but suits would not present much of a problem. Not that I see much advantage, anyway. It's only postponing things, isn't it?"

"I guess so."

Wrapped to the eyes they stood looking at each other for a moment, surrounded by an all pervading, tomblike silence. When at last Rad gave a short laugh it sounded oddly noisy.

"I suppose I'm nuts," he said slowly, "but I have the oddest feeling that I want to get outside. I want to walk—and walk—and walk. Get away from this little prison."

"You're not nuts: I feel the same way," Ann said quietly. "A sort of—of urge to move. That it?"

He nodded, turned to the door and

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swung it open. In another minute he and Ann were together, glass helmets in position over their faces to shield them from the sword edged wind. They stood motionless for a while, aware of the fact that it was not actually night. The sun was shining—but what a travesty it was! It looked like a fire just about to die out, hanging low to the horizon in conformity with this northerly latitude. The stars gleamed in the ebony black sky with a brittle, inhuman grandeur. To the east, a moon looking as though it were in the umbra of total eclipse floated over the horizon. And then the titanic ice field itself, a perfect sample of the sheath that was bound sooner or later to encompass the world.

Neither Ann nor Rad spoke. In any case to do so meant raising their face helmets and consequent exposure to the wind. They turned and walked by common urge towards the west. Both of them were wondering exactly why they were doing this. They felt inevitably that they *must*. Sooner or later, they both realized, the cold already seeping through their furs would overpower them. They would drop, fall asleep, never awaken again. That was what this walking meant.

THE idiotic, expiring sun remained exactly where it was as they moved. It seemed endless hours to Rad before they finally came to a halt. Ann was pointing her furred arm ahead with curious eagerness. He wiped his sleeve over his face glass and stared, puzzled.

A long thin black line was breaking the eternal monotony of the plateau. He glanced at the girl sharply.

"Crack of some sort," he said, raising his helmet—and the breath froze instantly on his lips.

Ann nodded dumbly. They went on again at a somewhat faster pace, drawn now more by curiosity than expectancy. Probably only a gap where the ice field had parted anyway. And yet, in such cold?

They reached it at last, stood in awe struck amazement on the edge of a vast ravine some two hundred feet across. And down in its depths there was no ice! Despite the zero wind and all embracing cold not a trace of ice had formed. The thing was incredible.

After a moment or two Rad made up his mind, pointed into the chasm's depths. Ann guessed his meaning and nodded. By slow degrees they began to descend from ice to a region of barefaced rock that had not even a vestige of snow. Baffled, Rad raised his face helmet experimentally—but the merciless blast of cold was absent. Down here the air was almost mild.

"Volcanic action?" Ann questioned, pulling away her own shield and staring around in the starlight. "Can't be anything else, can it?"

He shook his head. "Dunno. I never heard of volcanic action in this part of the Arctic. More likely that the Quake opened up new seams in this quarter of the globe and this is one of them. Funny it being warm though."

"Even funnier how we walked so conveniently to it."

"Yeah—that's right." For a moment they stood looking at each other perplexedly. There was little doubt about the fact that some inexplicable urge had driven them hither from the airplane. Exactly why neither of them could understand.

"Well, let's go lower," Ann said at length. "Might as well finish the job now we've gotten this far."

The warmth remained at the same temperature as they climbed slowly down into the dim gloom. They descended nearly three hundred feet before they finally touched bottom— And here was a curious thing. The bottom

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of the ravine contained a smaller crack along its entire length of no more than two foot width—but it was not rock, but metal, torn apart by the unimaginable force of earth concussions where the surface had slipped in the Quake.

"Metal—*here?*" Rad breathed in amazement, going down on his knees in the starshine. "And what a thickness!" He peered into the black depths. "Must be nearly six feet thick! Nothing but an earth slide *could* have broken metal like this."

"That's far more understandable than how it got here," Ann said, frowning. "What do we do now? Go in?"

"May be bottomless. Just a minute. . ."

Rad reached aside, picked up a comfortably heavy stone and dropped it in the crack. Almost immediately afterwards there was a metallic response from the depths.

"Only about a twelve foot drop," he muttered. "Might as well die in here as anywhere. Let's go!"

HE dangled his feet over the edge of the crack, lowered himself until he hung by his hands, than let go. As he had guessed, the drop was not very considerable. A moment later the girl had fallen in his arms. In silence they stood peering round in the blackness. The warmth here was more noticeable than ever, flowing round in comforting waves.

"Well, for all the good we'll do here we might as well be stone blind," Ann grunted at length. "It's warm, sure—but it must be volcanic action. We'd do better to try and get back to the cold and just fall asleep."

"I'm not leaving here until I've found out what the hell this place is doing in the Arctic," Rad answered stubbornly: then she heard him prowling around in the gloom. She stood waiting in moody silence, and more than once she could have sworn she felt the vibration of deeply buried engines somewhere beneath her feet—

Then with startling suddenness there was light! It gushed forth in blinding brilliance, made them cover their eyes for a moment. . . When they could see clearly again they found they were standing in a small circular chamber like the safety compartment of a submarine. At one end it ended in sheer metal wall, but at the other there was a massive valve with a monstrous bolt thrust across it. No age, no sign of corrosion, had touched that strange metal.

"Well, where the devil does the light come from?" Rad demanded at length, gazing round. "Must be concealed between ceiling and wall. But who switched it on?"

Ann pointed significantly to the floor. "Maybe that vibration has something to do with hidden engines. Feel it?"

He nodded slowly, scratching his chin in bewilderment and staring up at the sundered roof. Then he swung round and went to the valve, started to work on the clamps and bars with Ann assisting him. Even so it took them an hour. Then it swung open slowly to reveal a softly lighted cavern that was in itself a wilderness stretching to infinity.

They stepped through the opening, glanced back sharply as the valve mysteriously closed again behind them. They had taken an irretrievable step.

But for the moment the view absorbed them. They stood gazing on buildings and machines in untold numbers. Between the buildings were fields of synthetic crops growing sturdily under the artificial light. No living thing tended those fields—only robots who used mechanical aids to efficiency. Here indeed was a miniature continent

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flawlessly designed to meet every possible need. There were even radio towers and strange forms of traffic, all robot driven. Somehow the place looked like a vast scale model operated by an unseen hand.

At last the dazed eyes of the two rose to the further side of the colossal place. They beheld metal wall, arching up to a tremendous height and ending at last in a gigantic circle. Nor was it a plain circle—it was a perfectly drawn replica of the moon! The markings were unmistakable, chiseled into the metal. The dead seas, the rills, the craters, the mountains—

"Map of the moon," Ann breathed in wonder. "Can there be—be Selenites in this place?"

Rad looked round with mystified eyes. "Search me! Anyway, it's shelter. Food too no doubt and—" He swung round sharply at a sudden sound, gave an exclamation of alarm. Four robots had approached silently from the expanse, driven by powers unknown.

TO dodge them was impossible: they moved too fast. Before either Rod or the girl had a chance to escape they were seized in the metallic arms, lifted irresistibly, and borne along towards the heart of the vast mechanical expanse.

Finally they became passive and gave themselves up to looking about them as they were carried through the heart of the replete city to an ornamental looking building a little apart from the others. It was divided up in the fashion of a normal apartment block, but once they were inside its brightly lighted reaches they discovered as they passed that each room was far more perfectly conceived for comfort and service in a small space than any they had ever known.

Into one of the apartments they were finally taken, set down carefully on a divan, and left to themselves. The door closed gently, locked significantly.

"Now I know I'm dreaming!" Rad ejaculated at length, looking round on the softly lit walls of blue enamel, the quite normal looking furniture, the grateful warmth of the sunken heater. "Why, dammit, it's better than a first class New York hotel!"

Ann was about to speak, then she looked up with a sudden start as a panel in the wall opened abruptly and shot forth a heavy, loaded tray filled with drink and foodstuffs. Softly the panel slid back into position.

"You're right—it *is* a dream!" she said wryly. "We're out in the ice fields right now, having delusions—thinking of all the things we'd like to have, and instead—"

"Eat, my friends!"

They swung round at that voice, but saw nobody. Then Rad gave a sudden start and pointed dumbly to the wall over their heads. A panel had come into life as a screen and was televizing a picture of a man of apparently incredible age, his face a network of seams and wrinkles, his mouth toothless and sunken.

"Oh!" Ann gasped, horror stricken. "How—how *awful!*"

"Shut up—he'll hear you!" Rad hissed.

Evidently her voice had carried through a concealed microphone for the faintest suggestion of a smile curved that old mouth. The almost hidden eyes peered out from sunken sockets.

"Don't be alarmed, either of you. I am your friend. Eat, and while you do so I will explain."

Slowly they stood up, tugged off their stifling suits, then moved to the table. The food was all they could have wished, and the light wine that went

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with it—but they were so busy looking up at the televized face they had hardly time to notice anything else.

CHAPTER V

City Beneath the Ice

"I AM OLD," the face said wearily. "Unguessably old, but I have preserved my life by every means known to my science until such a time as this, when a worthy man or woman—or as it happens, both—could take over the results of my own and my dead colleagues' scientific achievements. That day is here.

"I know you, Radford Blake—and you, Ann. I watched your rise to power through televisional means. I watched your courage in the face of overwhelming odds, and I watched too your dethronement by the unscrupulously ambitious Saxby West. I had planned that I would send for you at one period, then I stayed my hand when I realized you were to be sent to the Arctic. It was inevitable that you should find the ice break—mental telepathy, amplified, forced you to find it. Maybe you felt an uncommon urge?"

"Yes," Rad acknowledged very quietly. "And you, sir—what are you, anyway?"

"I am a Selenite—the last of a mighty race of a world long since dead. I am a master of science, a ruler of mechanical aids to progress. Here in this deep underworld you behold scientific

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perfection and synthesis to the last degree—but not synthesis of life. That has forever eluded me. There was a time when my colleagues and I ruled the moon. At that period earthly life was crawling up the ladder. Volcanic eruptions and fast thinning air on our own world forced us to the mother world. We built numberless cities in various lands. In some cases my ancestors rose to dominance, but in other instances licentiousness and laziness brought an end of those early civilizations.

"We were a young race then, full of the follies of the young. But there came a time when a terrific earthquake shattered all our works. The entire surface of the globe slipped. Sobered, my forbears realized they had to start again. A weeding out began: the scientific was sorted from the useless. What remained of the cities were mere ruins, thousands of miles from their original position because of an earth-slip created through the passage of densely heavy material close to the earth."

"Neutronium?" Rad demanded. "The one we recently encountered?"

"The very same, but on that occasion it was far enough away to escape being drawn into the sun. It became evident to my people that the surest method of progress lay in going underground, in the least known quarter of the world—the Arctic. Down below the race would not interfere with normal mankind and could also be left in peace under a solid roof of pack-ice. Further, there was inexhaustible power supply to be gained from the earth's steady spin against the ether—enormous currents concentrated at the Pole, the surplus of which has sometimes been seen in the form of the Aurora Borealis, or else has been driven to the opposite pole to appear as the Aurora Australis.

"Down here, protected by a metal which can never be crushed by the mightiest of ice, given power that can never fail so long as the earth rotates—and therefore independent of the light and heat of the sun now so surely expiring—is a land for the chosen. And the chosen shall be those who tried to gain real government, and failed. Those whom you call democrats, and who will be bound to be exiled to these polar wastes before long. But as they come, my telepathic machinery will lead them here even as it led you. That they will be worthy remains undoubted. Particularly as you will again rule over them, Radford Blake."

THERE was a long silence, then at last Rad said haltingly,

"You—you mean you are handling this—this land over to me and my followers without knowing a thing about me?"

"I know all about you: I have intimated that much. I have followed your movements, understand your language, have debated all there is about you. I know you to be a young man of strength and just motives, with a wife who has useful scientific knowledge which can soon be augmented. I shall only die content when I know that this long empty land—save for me—has been handed over to worthy hands, representatives of the mother world, Earth. Down here, when the surface is frozen and dead, you and your followers will have nothing to fear. No amount of ice can ever smash this underworld. Nor will there ever again be an earth-slip. What damage could be done has been done—one compartment broke under the force of sliding ice above, but naturally the slip was by no means as noticeable at the pole here as it would be on the equator line. Fortunately the automatic sealing doors closed the

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broken compartment section for all time. I left it as it was, knowing you would eventually find it useful no matter in what manner you finally came here.

"In all your wildest dreams, Blake, you could never have made so perfect a haven for your followers. Not even with *alcazite*. I have done what I can to transform these buildings into earthly appearance for the coming of the others—but there is still much to do. I shall need help. Rest now, both of you, and later we will meet personally. You will then see the resources of this chosen land, learn what to do to take my place, master all details. And then—"

The face faded from the screen. The speaker became mute.

COMPLETELY unaware of the strange events being enacted in the far North, sure within his own mind that the fading sun was only a temporary phase, Saxby West took advantage of his dictatorship with a ruthless disregard for human feelings, concentrated mainly on exactly how much he could make out of a deal with protective shelters.

Once he had seen all the democrats exiled to the Arctic—men, women and children sent forth in remote controlled planes without a single personal possession—beyond what they could smuggle along at the last moment—he felt ready to tackle more immediate matters. In vain, astronomers warned him that the sun was really dying. Being a totally unscientific man he did not place the slightest credence on what they said. He stifled all their reports, suppressed all news that might leak to his masses of followers—or when they got too inquisitive he had them done away with entirely through the medium of his relentless agents.

And as West's armies of men burrowed into the earth with the best instruments at their command, the earth grew colder. The sun, after West had been in power for three months, had become a mere red ball that no longer gave forth heat at all. The moon, shining by reflected light, no longer appeared in the heavens.

Beholding these things West had to admit he was inwardly a little disturbed. Things had gone much worse: no sense in denying that. Nor was there much optimism in the news flashing to him across the frozen world of vast ice storms obliterating what few surface cities remained, killing millions of people in the very midst of their effort to drive underground.

West increased his efforts. Once he even regretted that he had exiled all the *alcazite* chemists to the Arctic. He had to rely on reinforced steel now whether he liked it or not. No matter, he was piling up millions for future control. Shelter after shelter, stocked with every possible necessity to meet a long siege, was rushed through to final completion at fifty feet below the surface. West allowed no respite.

With his immediate associates he evolved a counter check system for the housing of the populace, but even at that he was forced to the realization that if millions could be sheltered, far more millions would perish. He suppressed the information hurriedly, worked out a system of survival for those whom he knew were rigid totalitarians.

BUT that did not satisfy the people. They were becoming insane with panic as news of disaster after disaster radioed across the darkening, freezing world. They demanded shelter as the sun turned from red to a pale, dull glimmer, as they staggered helplessly in sub zero winds, or died horribly in their ef-

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forts to get justice for themselves.

And through it all crept vast ice pack from the oceans. Insomuch as water on freezing expands a twelfth of its volume, the frozen oceans began to crawl over the land in a solid, slow moving tidal wave, a white juggernaut that mowed down everything in its track invincibly. It came from out of the dismal, howling wastes of the north, closed down slowly towards the darkening equatorial regions like a mammoth hydraulic press of ice, waiting to join the other mountainous ice pack creeping up from the south polar regions.

Regardless of orders, of checking systems, frantic with the nearly instellar cold, and hunger, the lashed peoples of America made for the West shelters and fought their way in against troops and all the resources of the militia. This was the last chance of survival. And still they did not know the shelters were only steel. They had assumed that the impregnable *alcazite,* used by Radford Blake was being used by Saxby West also. Not yet did they know how utterly their demigod had betrayed them.

Huddled in the depths of the shelters they heard the last wild cries from other parts of the doomed world. In Europe, shelters of beryllium steel and concrete had smashed in like eggshells under the impact of spreading Atlantic ice.

The buried people of the Americas laughed hysterically. They had *alcazite!* They waited, confident— But Saxby West himself was stunned into speechlessness when the news of beryllium steel collapse—far stronger material than his own reinforced steel—came like a truncated cry from the wilderness. He sat in his own quiet shelter with his men around him—the men who had shared in the gain of profits from substituting steel for *alcazite.* Financiers, most of them, masters of labor, using the masses as pawns. And now they too faced death!

They sat in a little semicircle before the viewing screens connected with the surface, watched the milling myriads that had been locked out at the closure of the gigantic valves, watching them as they ran in mad fright before a vast wall of shining white crawling inevitably forward in the dim light of the stars. The surface metropolis was crumbling and rending. The ice reared up like a titanic arm of judgment—inevitable, relentless.

Jasper Gaylord, controller of more money than he could possibly imagine, turned his fat, greasy face to the silent West in sudden fright as the mass loomed nearer.

"West, what have you done?" he shouted hoarsely, leaping to his feet. "What have you done to all of us? Nothing can stand against *that!* Nothing! How are we supposed to survive to use the money we have made?"

Silly, trifling little cry in the face of all embracing doom. West knew it now, sat huddled in his chair, deaf to the chatter of his colleagues, his eyes fixed immovably on that screen. He was realizing in those agonizing seconds whither his totalitarian ideals and passion for money had led him— Into extinction.

He must die, and millions with him.

Perhaps it was minutes, perhaps hours. He did not know. But he realized that at last all the thunders of a crashing world descended upon him as the ice pack came right overhead. He had a momentary vision of steel walls crumpling up like sheets of thin tin, of hearing wild and frantic shouts from the depths of a crumbling hell.

Then blackness. . .

THE world was dead. The last trump had sounded. From end to end, from equator to Poles, there was a

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sameness. As the months had passed, ice leveling itself over mountain, plain and former sea, it had formed itself into one complete blanket. The atmosphere too was slowly solidifying. Life was extinct—except in the far north.

There, some two miles down under the ice, the democratic exiles had come —those who had been able to brave the blizzard winds and answer the telepathic impulses from the chosen land. Even so, many had died in the struggle. Now some fifteen hundred were present —men, women and children. The race would go on, under the ice, might one day even defeat their prison and escape to other worlds. But that was in the future. For the present, they were content, chained to a planet that had a white dwarf as its luminary, a faded, densely heavy star that had been the lord of day.

Truly, the end of the world had come. Yet to the buried people there was a certain richness in the situation. They had everything they had formerly had —and more. Their little universe was still expanding into the deeper quarters of the still hot earth. They were doing things denied on the surface because of tempest and flood. Many of their democratic ideals might reach a glorious fruition.

And they had Rad Blake and Ann as their leaders. Some day, perhaps, their children would take over control of the rising generation, and so it would go on.

But Rad and Ann at least knew whom to thank. There were times when they went into a little known quarter of the city and gazed in reverent silence on a small, weedy figure—stone dead, yet preserved at his own will by scientific processes.

The last man of the moon had died content. The knowledge of his peoples, the finer principles of a world wiped out by cosmic disaster, would live on—until the world itself became drifting dust.

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Moon Died

By DON WILCOX

EARTH'S day of reckoning was near; the Moon was breaking up. Ray Lattimer had eight months to finish the space radio before disaster came . . . then greed interfered.

CHAPTER I

The Moon Is Coming!

TRUE to the predictions of astronomers, a stray comet swept past the earth. It slipped by safely but left seeds of disaster in its wake: it drew the moon out of its course. That satellite accelerated earthward. It spiralled into the earth's danger zone seeking a new orbit. Calamities followed.

Great tides, hundreds of feet high, rolled over the seaboards and washed cities into the ocean. People fled to the mountain tops. The earth groaned, storms thrashed, the seas went mad. The land was bombarded with deadly meteors as the moon's icy mountain peaks cracked and hurtled into space.

Days were blackened and nights were filled with ghostly white light as the huge moon circled close. That menacing satellite covered one fifteenth of the visible sky as its bulging form hovered over the earth. Old Luna and her mother planet were headed for a crack-up.

How soon? Months—years—centuries? Terror stricken Man huddled close to Mother earth and waited.

Life went on. The hail of meteorites slackened a little. The giant tides found a new rhythm. Shrunken continents assumed new coast lines. Man crept forth and began to repair his civilization.

He redrew his maps of the continents, he burrowed deeper into the earth, he built protections against the surging seas and the raining meteorites,

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and—out of his human weakness, optimism—he gambled heavily upon the safety of his flimsy devices. But his days on this earth were numbered.

Scientists swarmed the observatories to watch and calculate and predict. Their reports were never hopeful. It was common knowledge that each day the menacing egg-shaped monster drew closer. Each day it bulged more dangerously. Soon it would crack and send great fragments crashing to earth; and when it did so, no living thing would stand the heat of that concussion.

Space ships did a land-office business. Hordes of people migrated to Mars as their ancestors had migrated to America a thousand years before. Everyone who could afford it applied for reservations. Interplanetary Lines could not expand its facilities fast enough.

The space pilots and hostesses were badly overworked. They frequently snapped under the strain. They were fighting time with the fever of rescue workers who know the dam must soon burst.

More Space Pilots Wanted!

Advertisements blazed from the walls of the underground streets A new call was issued on the day that Lane Carruth reached the age limit. He registered eagerly and presented his qualifications. The official was impressed.

"So you trained under Ray Lattimer?" he said, eyeing the boy.

"Yes, sir."

"There's no question but what we'll use you. Come back in the morning."

Lane rushed to the underground station and caught a train for Rocky Mountain Observatory where the International Conclave of Scientists was convening. He must find his sister and Ray Lattimer and tell them the news.

VIVIAN CARRUTH and Ray Lattimer sat on a vast glass roofed porch, one of the most popular lobbies at Rocky Mountain Observatory. The evening sun flashed among the mountain peaks. On the eastern horizon the wide brim of the moon appeared like a bloody knife edge slowly lifting.

More than the moon, however, the faces of the scientists engrossed the attention of the couple, as the endless line moved down the escalator from the tower of telescopes. Anxious faces, tense lips, nervous eyes.

The young couple sat in silence. There was no use commenting on what they saw. They had watched the fears of these men grow from year to year as they attended the annual Conclave.

But no amount of fear or worry could help, Vivian told herself. She was already doing everything she could. She was a space hostess for the Interplanetary Lines. That was how she had met this keen-eyed engineer at her side. He was not only a pilot—he was something of a genius. He had charted routes and contributed inventions to space navigation, had trained scores of pilots, had dared to help with the surveys of the moon, and now—

Vivian's thoughts broke. What was Ray Lattimer's new work? He had never told her. She had seen him so little. This was her first day off in months. Why had he been so anxious for her to attend this Conclave with him?

Vivian's eyes widened in surprise. Lane was coming through the crowd toward her.

"If it isn't my long lost brother! What in the world are you doing here?"

"Looking for you two," said the gleaming-eyed youth. "I've come all the way from Interplanetary headquarters to spring the big news."

Ray Lattimer read the boy's face. "You've signed up."

"Righto. I report tomorrow morn-

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ing." Lane's exuberance faded as he looked into Lattimer's cool eyes. The trainer of pilots could express volumes of disapproval without speaking a word.

"What's wrong?" Lane asked.

"Sit down with us," said Ray. "What does your sister think of all this?"

Vivian did not understand Ray's misgivings.

"It's exactly what I expected. With all the training and experience you've given Lane he ought to be an A-1 pilot."

"He will be," said Lattimer, "but signing up for Damon D. Sheebler and his Interplanetary Lines—at a time like this—" he paused thoughtfully.

"I don't get it," said Lane.

"Take a look at those tell-tale faces coming down the escalators," said Ray. "Tomorrow their dire prophecies will scream from the headlines and over the radios, and thousands of new applications will pour in to Sheebler for quick voyages to Mars."

"Well, that's why he needs more new pilots—"

"And more old ships," Lattimer cut in.

"*Old* ships?"

"Let me tell you something," said the veteran pilot.

The three heads gathered in close. "Damon D. Sheebler's great monopoly is coining money hand over fist. I've no objection to that. If he could build ships and train pilots fifty times faster he still couldn't take in the money as fast as his customers are waving it at him. But—if he wants to be unscrupulous, there's nothing to prevent him from dragging out his worn-out ships and putting them into use—"

"Ray!" Vivian protested, "you surely don't suspect Damon D. Sheebler, the president of the greatest space line in the world—"

"I've suspected him for a long time," said Lattimer, "and my little encounter with him a month ago didn't improve my opinion."

"You talked with *him?*" Lane's youthful face glowed as if he had suddenly come into the shadow of greatness. To him there had been no greater name than that of Damon D. Sheebler.

"He sent for me to come and make technical examinations of all his ships. He paid me big money—in advance. I found a few that could be put back into service, but I condemned all twenty of the KPB series. They're only two years old but they're about as safe as starting to Mars on a firecracker. I told him to junk them. It made him angry. He faked a report and tried to force me to sign it."

"Not really," Vivian gasped.

"What'd you do?" asked Lane with one eyebrow up.

"Started to walk out on him. He blocked the door and used some language I'm not used to. I lost my temper and smacked him, and—well, that's how we parted."

"Gee!" Lane's mouth spread in astonishment. "And to think you used to be his crack pilot—and his trainer—and his technical adviser—and you popped him! Gosh!"

Vivian was silent. She was no doubt disturbed by this startling news, but her eyes showed a glint of admiration for Ray's rash behaviour.

"So let me warn you, Lane," the engineer narrowed an eye at the boy, "if Sheebler puts any KPB ships back into service—be sure you keep out of them."

"Of course." Lane sat thoughtfully for a few minutes, then rose to go. "Just think, I'll soon be taking off for Mars—maybe tomorrow—in a ship of my own! I'll see you at the American Headquarters at the other end, Sis."

"Don't forget what Ray has told you," Vivian warned.

"KPB. I won't forget."

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"One more hint," said Ray. "Sheebler might be snake enough to resurface those old boats so you'd never know them. Check up on details. The KPB series had octagonal windows built into the framework in the rear, you know. That design has been obsolete for two years."

"Okay. See you on Mars."

NEITHER Vivian nor Ray voiced the concern they felt over the high spirited lad, after he had boarded the train back to Interplanetary Headquarters. His glowing ambition to be sole commander of a space ship had not faded through his training period. He was quick, efficient, and willing—even eager—to take a chance. Sheebler's game would lure hundreds of his kind, thought Ray Lattimer.

Vivian and Ray sauntered back to a secluded window. The sky monster, still creeping up from the black mountainous horizon, cast its baleful light upon their faces. Even though panes of invisible glass separated them from the out-of-doors, the lazy white giant seemed close enough to touch. It consumed hours in rising. To Ray and Vivian that was the natural thing; though some of the old people loved to tell how swiftly it used to skim across the heavens in the times before the month had been so calamitously shortened.

Vivian broke the silence. "If the end should come soon—I know it's criminal of Sheebler to take a chance with condemned ships, but thousands are going to be left here to perish anyway. Even a rickety space ship gives them some chance. After all, there's nothing else."

Ray was slow to respond. "There might be," he said bluntly.

The pretty girl's lips parted in surprise. She wanted to ask, "But what else could there be? How can anyone hope to escape this doomed planet except in space ships?" But she waited in silence. Evidently there was something revolving in his mind that he wasn't ready to express. Instead he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Come," he said. "It's time for the opening address of the Conclave. Let's find some comfortable seats in the balcony. Good chance for you to catch up on your sleep."

CHAPTER II

Conference of Scientists

THE most conspicuous thing before the assembled scientists was the moon. The huge television screen at the front of the auditorium revealed it in full color, framed in corners of black sky. Speakers often pointed out significant marks upon the satellite as they set forth their theories. At last the chairman introduced a slender, white-haired inventor who took the stage with impressive dignity. Lattimer grew tense.

"Here comes the bombshell," he whispered to the girl at his side.

"Professor Buchanan? I remember him. His speech always begins the same way. 'I assure you the moon will not strike this year.'"

Ray nodded. Vivian continued. "But I've heard he is a crackpot who wastes his time on impossible inventions. Surely you don't take any stock in his notions, do you, Ray?"

The young engineer did not answer, for the white haired man began to speak. There was strength and confidence in his voice, but his words spelled doom.

"Fellow scientists, I assure you that the moon will strike within a year. In fact, the end will come in two hundred

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and forty days!"

A tremendous confusion ensued throughout the assembly. It was minutes before the professor could continue. He turned to the living chart behind him and indicated with a pointer the places where fissures would soon appear. Then he plunged into a bewildering series of mathematical arguments. Ray sat on the edge of his seat.

Vivian was lost. Her mind wandered. She saw the great Damon D. Sheebler sitting in the speaker's row, and she knew why he was there. Each year the Conclave recommended expenditures to the governments of the world for the benefit of humanity, and they never failed to reward their most generous sum to Sheebler's great interplanetary space-ship monopoly.

Ray clutched her hand. "Now it's coming."

"You have heard my theory," the white-haired professor was saying. "In a moment I shall invite your questions. But there is one thing more I must say. The only hope for the millions of people on this planet is to migrate immediately. The past decades have proved that space ships will save only a small fraction of the population. The few who can afford the costly passage. Already our colonies on Mars are crying for laborers—but how many laborers have answered the call? Precious few. They can't afford it. Our governments have repeatedly refused to buy transportation for anyone because they think it is a lost cause."

"It *is* a lost cause!" came a voice from the audience.

"It is *not* a lost cause!" the speaker pronounced in a powerful voice. "If the governments will grant their appropriations to me at once I shall transport people to Mars by the millions—" He was interrupted by a chorus of laughter and boos led by Sheebler. He cried on: "Within five months I shall be ready with the most gigantic machine ever invented—"

Another volley of boos.

"If you will only back me with public money . . ." Boo! Boo! " . . . transport the entire population free of charge!" Boo! Crackpot! Boo! Silence! S-s-sh! "The foundation of this great machine has already been laid near an unlimited fuel supply. All we need is money, labor, cooperation. The invention has already been proved!"

This time the boos were drowned in a clamor for silence. The chairman commanded order. The professor spoke on in a fiery manner.

"Let me remind you that there are three thousand of us here in this Conclave. Everyone of us expects to get away to Mars in time to save his own neck. Most of us have already made reservations. But let me tell you, with the cataclysm only eight months off, we'll be fighting among ourselves for places."

There was a piercing silence.

"And how many more times will the price of the passage be raised in the next two hundred and forty days?"

THE stocky, black haired Sheebler bounced to his feet. "I protest!" he cried.

The white-haired professor nodded with dignity to the angry space-ship magnate. "Mr. Sheebler protests. That is natural. If my invention is given a chance he will cease to reap the fat income with which he plans to become the financial czar of our new civilization on Mars."

"Why, you—" the enraged Sheebler was restrained by those near him.

"Mr. Sheebler will of course deny this. I wonder if he will deny that he is putting twenty outworn space ships

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back into service even though they were condemned."

A rumble of protests. Vivian looked at Ray. "How did he know that?"

"I told him," said Ray.

"You—?"

The chairman brought the house to order, and asked the speaker to confine his remarks to his subject.

"Then let me conclude by saying that even if you are content to rely completely upon space ships, you should remember that under the present monopolistic arrangement all of your eggs are in one basket. A single meteorite could crush that basket. I anticipate a renewed menace of deadly meteorites this very week from the moon's outer shell. That is all. I am ready for your questions."

The president of Interplanetary Lines again jumped to his feet, gave his chin a haughty thrust, and addressed the chairman with an air of condescension. "I believe our illustrious speaker mentioned an invention." The word invention was sure to evoke laughter from those who considered Buchanan a crackpot. "Will the illustrious gentleman please tell us whether this is the same invention he has been prating about for the past ten years?"

The white-haired man on the stage nodded. "The same one, Mr. Sheebler."

"That's all I want to know," said Sheebler in a subtle tone. He turned to the audience, whirled a finger near his head as if to say, "Crazy," and sat down. A hum of ridicule filled the room. Buchanan did not flinch.

"Ten years on the same invention," he resumed, "just as Noah spent many years on his Ark. People laughed at Noah—until the floods came."

Another questioner rose, a delegate from a foreign land who was puzzled by all these overtones of ridicule. "I wish to know whether any other scientists besides you are working on this invention?"

"I am proud to answer that for several weeks I have had invaluable assistance from one of the most brilliant young scientists in America, who is present at our meeting tonight. He has asked me not to reveal his name."

The scales dropped from Vivian's eyes. Hundreds of heads in the audience craned this way and that, wondering who the mysterious assistant might be; but Vivian knew.

"Ray Lattimer!" she whispered, half in reprimand. "Now I know why you've been going around in such a dreamy mood. You're working on Buchanan's schemes."

"Are you glad to hear it?"

"I don't know. I always thought he was crazy."

"He may be, but I'll swear he's got the most revolutionary machine you ever heard of. They say the telephone and the radio were marvels in their day. But this invention—Listen—"

SEVERAL questioners had clamored for the professor to describe the nature of his invention. He silenced them and gestured to someone off stage who brought in a sizeable chart. It contained a simple diagram of the atom, which every scientist at once recognized.

"A few centuries ago," he began, "we learned to transmit sound electrically by constructing delicate mechanisms that were sensitive to the individual sound waves. Later, in television, we learned to transmit light waves electrically, by breaking up the image into tiny clusters of waves. In either case we were successful only because we had learned to deal with tiny units of energy-sound waves and light waves.

"Our mechanical equipment has come a long way since the perfection of

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full-color television. We have long been able to take the atom apart and put it back together again.

"I struck out on the hypothesis that matter itself might be conducted electrically if a sufficiently intricate mechanism could be devised. For all matter, however solid it may feel to the hand, is in the final analysis not solid substance. It is simply energy-filled space.

"Lest my explanation become unnecessarily complicated, I shall not trouble you with the details of constructing the transmitting and receiving sets, to which my time has been devoted for the past ten years."

An impatient interrupter voiced the curiosity of the audience, "What were your results?"

"My first successful test," the professor answered "was performed three weeks ago with a few small objects—a key, a paper box, a bar of soap. They were placed on the moving belt which rolls into the transmitter at high speed. At the instant of reaching the area of wave detection they disappeared, reappearing at the same time upon the rolling belt of the receiving set some fifty yards distant." *

Incredulous whispers and murmurs of wonder passed over the auditorium.

"We immediately moved the receiving set to the distance of half a mile and tuned it in again at that point. Objects leaped the gap with the speed of light.

"To prove that our transmission of matter was virtually instantaneous we sent a burning match into the transmitter. It emerged from the receiver still burning. We were uncertain what the effect upon living things might be. We made our first trials with plants and discovered that they jumped through space uninjured. Next we tried a few forms of animal life—a small turtle, later a kitten and a dog. In each case we were successful. As the dog shot into the detection area of the transmitter it was instantaneously dissolved and was reformed at the receiver, half a mile distant."

"No!" cried one of Sheebler's cohorts in a taunting voice. "Bark and all?" It was a cynic's quip, but the inventor came back with a simple statement of fact.

"Any simple radio telephone will transmit the bark."

The professor continued:

"Next we increased the distance to twenty-five thousand miles by directing the radio impulses around the earth. After a slight difficulty in tuning, we succeeded in forcing material objects around the earth in one-seventh of a second." The white haired professor could not restrain his enthusiasm. "Fellow scientists, I am convinced that this application of radio will bring the greatest revolution in transportation the world has ever known."

The professor's sharp eyes saw the gathering storm of disbelief in the faces of the Sheebler faction. No doubt a large share of the scientists before him would think his words incredible. But enemies could not prevent him from bestowing his great boon upon mankind.

"Finally, my fellow scientists, I beg you to come to my Laboratories at Oil Plains to examine this invention and study the secrets of its mechanism; for who knows but what a giant meteor may crash through our barriers at any moment, putting an end to any of us—and our ideas with us. This invention must not be lost to the world."

The applause that followed was greater than the professor had expected. He had apparently aroused great inter-

* Since the energy of sound and light can be converted into electrical impulses, forced through space, and regenerated into the original form at the receiver, why not the energy of matter?—Ed.

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est, if not faith, in his space-leaping machine.

RAY LATTIMER studied the features of the lovely girl beside him. She was plainly bewildered. This was like magic. One could not believe without seeing. And yet it must be true. For Ray, whom she trusted more than anyone else in the world, had been nodding eagerly at every statement the professor had made.

Sheebler marched to the stage determined to shake the faith that was gravitating toward the visionary inventor. The stout dark man thrust his heavy chin this way and that as he shouted his powerful venom. At his best he was a master at sarcasm; but the ground had been shaken beneath his feet in the past few minutes, and now his voice revealed the rage that fought within him.

"How you can sit and listen to such insipid talk is more than I can understand. We have one task before us—to build more space ships and transport more people." Applause. "And this erratic dreamer would have us stop in the middle of our race for life, to go off on a wild goose chase. If this man who calls himself an inventor because he muddles around in a laboratory (laughter) has actualy performed this impossible black magic, why didn't he put the machine in his pocket and bring it along to the Conclave and give us a look at it—along with the turtles and puppy dogs?" Laughter and applause.

The speaker took up a tone of bitterness.

"Fellow scientists, you are being mocked. We're living in the last years of the earth. There's no point in clutching at straws. It's time to board space ships in a quiet orderly manner, awaiting your turns. If you wish to speed up the procession, then demand that your governments allot more money for my factories. But don't be hoodwinked into thinking you've got only eight more months. The moon will run its course. There's plenty of time. We scientists are too sane to be deluded by an alarmist—who even tries to tell us that this week the moon will give us bigger and better meteorites. How can anyone have the effrontery to predict—"

The irate speaker was suddenly drowned out by a roar from the emergency loud speakers.

"E-e-e-mergency broadcast! E-e-e-mergency broadcast! Everybody under cover! A terrific blast of meteors is falling near the Atlantic! Everybody under cover! Meteor shower! Meteor shower!"

Confusion ensued. Such general warning signals were rare. The men of science were at once in motion—needlessly, for they were comparatively safe in this well protected pocket deep in the Rocky Mountains. The chairman shouted at them for several minutes before they recovered from their fright and settled back into their seats. At last they quieted.

Sheebler floundered in an effort to proceed. His words of reassurance sounded flat. He resorted to sarcasm again.

"This little shower of clods has come just in time to enable our Master Mind to say, 'I told you so.' No doubt he will claim this is proof that his prediction for a bad week—"

"E-e-e-mergency broadcast! E-e-e-mergency broadcast!" boomed the speakers. "The American Capitol has been struck by a huge meteorite, reported to be one of the largest ever known. A terrific loss of life is feared. The damage of the impact extends over hundreds of miles. Not even a crude estimate of the casualties is possible at this time. It is believed that much of

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the Capitol city has been crushed deep into the earth. . . ."

Pandemonium broke loose throughout the auditorium. Ray Lattimer did not wait to see what happened. In his swiftly working mind he had already embarked upon a course of action.

"I'm leaving you, Vivian. I've got to get to the Capitol by the quickest route. I'm taking Buchanan with me. I don't know how long the earth is going to last, but we've got to make a try—get some government money—if there's any left to get. It's up to Buchanan and me. We've got to build a super-model of the professor's invention—the most powerful radio the world ever saw."

"Here—on earth—to be destroyed?"

"Here—with a receiver on Mars—to deliver everybody from the great crash. There's no time to lose, if the professor knows his moon; and I believe he does. So long, Vivian."

For a short moment the girl was lost in his feverish embrace. He looked at her intently.

"Won't you give up your hostess job when you get back to Mars—and wait for me there?" Ray feared his question was futile, for nothing could shake Vivian from her dangerous profession, it seemed. "Won't you—after what you've learned tonight?".

The girl thought of the frenzied passengers who depended upon her services. She shook her head.

"Then take care of yourself. Call me if you need me. I'll be with Buchanan at Oil Plains. Look out for Sheebler. So long."

CHAPTER III

Sheebler's Treachery

AT the headquarters of the Interplanetary Lines the following day, Lane Carruth sat impatiently in one of the underground offices where he had been waiting since an early hour. One report after another came in over the emergency speakers on the stunning disaster at the Capitol. Every new bulletin stirred the anxiety that burned within the young pilot. His chance to be of service. His share before it was too late. His honor, for he pictured himself steering a load of passengers safely into the port at Mars.

Hell-fire. Why wouldn't they let him start? Even with the thousands of crowding, hysterical people jamming the waiting rooms and crying to go, he must wait until Sheebler came to approve him and assign him to a ship.

His friends came to see him off, wearied of waiting, bid him bon voyage, and left. At mid-day Vivian found him, gave him the startling news from the Conclave and repeated Ray's warning before boarding her scheduled ship.

Finally Sheebler arrived. Lane saw him pass through the offices. Another hour of waiting. At last the young pilot was called.

He was conveyed directly to a shining new ship that was already loaded with passengers. The great Sheebler himself stood by the entrance and gave him his final instructions before he mounted. The executive's orders were rapid, incoherent. He would tolerate no questions. He was anxious to get Lane aboard.

"Get your air chambers closed and get off—and be quick about it."

It was the very order he had been living for. The thrill of anxiety was still surging through him as he mounted; but Sheebler's rough-shod manner stung him. His suspicions rose. His alert eyes caught this detail and that.

"Octagonal windows in the rear!"

He darted back through the entrance

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and leaped down the steps to Sheebler who was cracking orders at the ground crew.

"You've made a mistake, Mr. Sheebler. This is a condemned ship."

"It's a brand new ship," snapped the executive. "Get back in there. You're set to go off in four minutes."

"No, Mr. Sheebler, you're wrong. It's a KPB. It's condemned."

The dark eyes of Damon D. Sheebler lighed with fury. "Shut up, you fool. You're hired to run that ship."

"Then I quit."

"You can't quit. Get up there!"

"Not in that ship. I tell you—" Bold words for a recruit to hurl at the famed president. Sheebler was in no mood for words. His hand dipped into his coat pocket. Lane felt the point of a revolver against his side. It crowded him. No words were necessary. He moved up into the space ship with Sheebler pressing close against him. He edged into the control room toward the pilot's seat.

"Strap yourself in," Sheebler muttered.

The white faced lad obeyed, but he had no intention to plunge into space against Ray Lattimer's advice. Ray, after all, was his greatest hero.

Instinctively his fist swung into action. It did not land, for a sharp pain cut through his body. The control room muffed the dull bark of the revolver. Lane slumped in his seat. His eyes closed.

Doors went closed, locks snapped. A few seconds of silence. Then the earth roared and sent forth the great steel bullet whining into space.

GREAT meteorites fell that week. The largest ever known. Scientists turned to Professor Buchanan and volunteered their services. They were given sections of blue print, told to roll up their sleeves and go to work. Scores of engineers and skilled technicians offered to help.

Lattimer had been successful in securing an ample grant of cash from the disorganized American treasury, and this contributed to popular confidence. As nations became panic-stricken from the new terrors of hailing meteorites and disorganized conditions, they caught up the rumor that a gigantic machine was being constructed at Oil Plains.

The inventors at Oil Plains were going to send people and goods through space!—send them to Mars! swiftly—safely—free! That was the story that raced over the continents and stirred the masses of calamity stricken people to hope. Already a small model was working. If only the great one could be completed in time!

People began to migrate to Professor Buchanan's corner of the earth. Expeditions were organized by many nations and races. The spark of faith that was struck among the international delegates at the Conclave became wildfire all over the world.

Ray Lattimer remained the cool, clear thinker at the vortex of a furious whirlpool of activity. Without him the veteran inventor would have been overwhelmed. Together they subdivided the multiplying responsibilities among competent leaders, so that their time was free for the crucial task, that of actual supervision of the construction work.

A dark problem loomed before them. How could they transport the receiving plant to Mars? It could be moved piece by piece on the space ships—but not if Sheebler knew what was happening, for he was bitterly hostile. Even if they constructed their own space ship for transportation purposes there would be a great danger that it would never

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reach its destination. Since the catastrophe of the American Capitol violence had grown apace. Sheebler's tactics were becoming flagrant here on earth; in the space world he would know no limits. Ray let the worry hang fire.

It was worry enough to hear the loud speakers booming, "E-e-e-mergency broadcast" so frequently. The concentrated workers would stop and listen to the brief report of some new terrifying disaster; then, muttering prayers inwardly that Oil Plains might be spared this growing onslaught of meteorites, would plunge back into their tasks with renewed fervor.

One radiocast from Mars sent a chill through Ray Lattimer as he sat in his underground office revising a blue print. The fateful message told of a space ship that had made an unfortunate landing a few miles beyond the Interplanetary field on Mars.

"The pilot's name was Lane Carruth," came the announcer's voice. "He died a few hours after the crash. By a miracle, no other fatalities occurred."

"Lane!" The engineer bit his lips hard as he thought of the youthful, eager pilot. An ugly thing to happen to the lad on his first voyage. It couldn't have been a faulty landing on Lane's part; Ray was sure of this, for he knew the lad's skill. It must have been a faulty ship. Lane must have been too anxious; he must have forgotten the warnings in the enthusiasm of the moment. And now he had paid the price. Ray thrust the blue print aside. He could not work today.

"Sheebler's doings!" he swore to himself. When reports of ships missing, ships crashing, ships exploding came in a wave in the next few days, and then sharply ceased—as if a ban had suddenly been placed on such reports—Ray read between the lines and knew that space-boats had become death traps. Sheebler was loading his passengers into anything—just to get their money.

VIVIAN'S voice came over the telephone. It was sweet music to Ray. She had a few hours between ships, she said. Could he take time off to see her? Could he! Soon she was safely in his arms.

Then through her tears she poured out the story of her dead brother.

"I was with him in his last hours. He told me all that happened. It was Sheebler."

"I knew it," Ray muttered. "That snake assigned him to a condemned ship. But why didn't Lane remember what we warned him?"

"He did remember," Vivian sobbed. "He knew it was a KPB. He resisted. Sheebler forced him on with a gun."

"What!"

"And then—when Lane tried to fight his way out—shot him!"

"Shot—!" Ray leaped to his feet as the heat of revenge surged through him.

"That's what killed Lane. It wasn't the crash. Poor kid. Sheebler left him unconscious at the controls, and when he woke he found the ship was shooting into space. Sheebler had set the ship off to cover up his crime. He doesn't care what happens to his passengers. I'm convinced of that now."

Ray's anger set him pacing across the floor. So the people bound for Mars were entrusting their lives to a murderer, a poisonous gold-grabber, who would fill a dead ship with paid passengers before shooting it out into the void.

"Lane fought for his life," the girl continued. "He treated the wound as best as he could, but death gained on him all the way. Somehow he hung on and struggled at the controls until

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he brought the ship to a stop on Mars. A few hours later he died."

There was a long silence as the thoughts of the two paid tribute to the heroism of Lane's brief career. The low roar of a distant space ship rocketing into the skies brought them back to the present.

"You've got to quit Sheebler now!" Ray took the girl into his arms almost fiercely. "He's throwing lives away. He might transfer you to a condemned ship anytime."

Vivian shook her head. "I have a long record of service—"

"What does that mean to a beast like Sheebler? He'd do it without batting an eye." He shuddered to think what peril hovered over this pretty girl. Didn't she realize she was tempting the fates? She was brave—as brave as they come, ready to give her last ounce of energy to help frantic people to safety—and yet a helpless pawn of a treacherous space-ship magnate gone mad in his hunger for power.

VIVIAN'S dark eyes gleamed strangely. She was trembling. Her manner frightened Ray.

"What is it?" he demanded. "Does Sheebler know—that you know he murdered Lane?"

"Yes. One of his men reported it to him."

Ray gasped. "God! Then you've got to quit. He knows you've got the goods on him. You could blast his business sky high. He'll send you off into space the first chance—"

"No. I'm safe." Her tone of assurance puzzled Ray. "I'll go on with it."

"But you can't," he persisted. "I can't let you. For my sake, please—"

"For your sake I've got to go on being a space-ship hostess just as if nothing had happened. How else can you arrange to get your receiver to Mars?"

They searched each other's eyes.

"My luggage is never inspected," she explained. "In a few trips I could smuggle all of the small model receiver through. The rest should be simple."

Ray now understood what the heroic girl was offering to do. If the small model receiver could be smuggled past Sheebler's inspectors and if one of Buchanan's engineers could get through to Mars to reassemble it and find a source of power to operate it, a big problem would be solved. Parcels of material could be shot through space at once. The big receiver itself could be delivered to Mars, piecemeal.

"It's wonderful of you, Vivian. But I can't let you take the chance. Especially now that Sheebler—"

"I haven't any fear of Sheebler, Ray," she said confidently.

"After what he did to Lane—"

"It so happens that Damon D. Sheebler is in love with me."

"Vivian!" Ray was stunned. The cold face of the famed man came into his mind—the greedy eyes that shone like a viper's, the surly lips. That heartless devil dared to think of beautiful, young Vivian Carruth. Ray was inflamed.

"I've suspected it for some time," said Vivian in an impassionate voice. "But now I know. We had our first talk today and he made it very obvious that he has been interested in me all along. He had just learned that I was Lane's sister and he had a pretty story fixed up to try to square things. As if things could ever be squared. But I listened. Every word was revolting, but I couldn't afford to betray my feelings. Not with a smuggling job before me. I've got to keep his confidence until that's done. You'll let me do it, won't you, Ray? Then I'll quit."

Ray was reluctant to make the decision that was before him. "Are you

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sure he doesn't suspect anything?"

Vivian was sure. "He's never seen you and me together. He trusts me completely. You've got to let me go ahead with it, Ray," she pleaded. "It's the one thing I can do. If you and Professor Buchanan succeed in making your great vision come true, I want to have had a small part in it."

"Small part!" Ray caught the girl's shoulders and drew her to him. "If you get that small receiving set through for Professor Buchanan, you'll have removed the biggest obstacle that confronts him."

"And you as well?"

Ray smiled and shook his head slowly. His thoughts had leaped from the invention to another dream that once held sway. It seemed remote now —that vision of a haven of safety for two—somewhere on Mars. Would it ever be attained? He glanced at the sky darkened by the massive scar-faced moon and wondered. Great was the barrier of space to be overcome, and narrow the margin of time. His ingenuity was pledged to fight these forces of nature in behalf of humanity. Suppose he should win. How little it would mean if he lost his personal battle. The menace of human treachery lurked before him, hidden like a coiled snake somewhere in the maze of events ahead.

"If that viper Sheebler ever lays a hand on you—"

"He won't, Ray. I'll keep out of his reach. Don't worry. As soon as I get your goods through to Mars I'll walk out on Interplanetary Lines for good."

CHAPTER IV

Buchanan's Success

PROFESSOR BUCHANAN in his famed speech at the Conclave had given the earth exactly two hundred and forty days to go. The weeks were slipping by swiftly. The earth's deadline was rapidly approaching, if the professor's judgment was to be trusted. Several astronomers concurred in his opinion; moreover, his predictions of several storms of meteorites had proved accurate. Before half of the two hundred and forty days were gone a paralyzing fear seized the masses of waiting people.

The notorious Sheebler himself fell victim to the creeping fear. In private he watched his moonometer with a fearful eye. It told him the satellite was gathering speed at an accelerating rate. He ceased to report the moonometer readings to his employees. It was time to keep an iron hand over every pilot, hostess, ground man, office worker. Undercurrents of panic were being generated among them which he must suppress. He must keep them working to the last.

One day a space ship failed to return from Mars. It was not an obsolete ship —all of these had long since gone to their doom. It was a new ship, operated by a crack pilot. An ill omen. The next day the incident was repeated; and the following day three more ships failed to come in to home port. Pilots and hostesses were being drained from service by fear. They were deliberately staying on Mars—while thousands of good pay customers were still waiting on earth.

Sheebler pressed a button. He would nip deserters in the bud. His loyal, brightly uniformed thugs would turn the trick. One to each space ship would do wonders to keep the ships on schedule.

When Vivian had packed the last parts of the small model receiver into her luggage and taken leave of Ray, she thought she was departing from the

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Earth for the last time.

"I'll be waiting for you on Mars," she had told him.

Their parting had been brief.

"When we get our giant transmitter working I'll come and find you," he said simply. "If the deal falls through —well, don't wait too long."

She boarded the space ship as usual and knew her luggage would give no trouble. But when a hulking, sinister looking person known as Clayface strode up in his purple uniform and addressed her with, "Hi, Baby. I'm keepin' you company and makin' sure you get a round trip," her heart sank. So she was to be chained to her job—chained to Sheebler to the finish. A dismal outlook. If she only could have told Ray. But at least she would get the baggage through. That was the important thing.

A few days later there was great rejoicing among a group of engineers and inventors at Oil Plains. The small model transmitter began to hum, and the objects which rolled into it would vanish.

Where did they go? Plainly they were dissolving instantaneously. Could the electrical impulses which they set in motion be brought back into focus at Mars? There were moments of tense waiting.

Then, nine and one half minutes after the sending began, the radio telegraph operator gave a loud whoop. "Here it is!" he shouted as he rushed to the group waving the telegraph tape. " 'Everything coming in fine. Congratulations to Professor Buchanan. We have entered a new age.' "

Ray Lattimer was thrilled to the toes. He was the first to shake hands with the wet-eyed Professor Buchanan. He shook hands with everyone he passed on his way to the radio telegraph, and there he turned loose his elation in a message of congratulations to Vivian. Her pluck had turned the trick.

He addressed the message to her in care of the American Colony Headquarters and comforted himself with the thought that it would reach her promptly.

THEN back to the whirlwind of labor. The decks were cleared for fast action. The mammoth receiver bound for Mars, now almost completed, lay in great stacks of parcels near the small model transmitter. Swiftly his crew went to work. Ton after ton of machinery shot into the mysterious sausage grinder to dissolve into radio waves.

"It won't be long now," said the professor, his visionary eyes gleaming triumphantly.

Ray returned his smile, but his mind was elsewhere. Why hadn't Vivian answered his radio telegram? Surely she was safe on Mars; he tried to put the worry out of his mind.

Still no word by the end of the week. What could have happened? Ray pounced on the radio telegrapher. "Find Vivian Carruth for me," he demanded. "She's somewhere on Mars—I think. And I want to be sure of it."

"That's what you told me yesterday," said the operator, "but I'll keep trying. By the way, here's another bulletin from the Mars astronomers."

Ray glanced at it and knocked it aside. Every bulletin from the American astronomers on Mars announced a greater bulging of the moon and warned that an early crack-up appeared inevitable. One didn't have to read Mars bulletins to know that. The moon told that to the naked eye. Predicted fissures had appeared and were showing deeper day by day. The millions of people who watched these changes were tormented by the mania of fear.

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Never in history had there been such a concentration of people as now gathered at Oil Plains. Streams of population from all over the world took up transient headquarters in the shadows of this industrial city, waiting for the great promise to materialize.

The organization of this ever-growing multitude was naturally flimsy. Some lawlessness and plundering were to be expected under such a temporary arrangement. Yet, surprisingly, there was a spirit of order, for every national group had been assigned to a given area; and most of these groups maintained a semblance of government backed by national soldiers.

The groups cooperated well. Nations that had been at each other's throats for centuries forgot their grievances under the threat of common destruction. They waited a common fate—either collective deliverance or collective death.

When individuals became impatient there was a convenient safety valve—the roads that led to Interplanetary Lines. The headquarters of the colossal space-ship monopoly were only fifty miles away. The underground highways and railways connecting Interplanetary with Oil Plains became the most active traffic arteries in the world, as the volume of impatient ones grew.

The Shifters, as they came to be known, were always on the go. Any new rumor could set them into motion in the opposite direction. If they heard that the inventors had bumped into technical difficulties they shifted to Interplanetary and joined the endless queques that fought for space-ship tickets. If they heard that the price of tickets had tripled, they bounded back to Oil Plains. At the rise of a moon with new threats on its swollen face, they flew back to the space-ship center again.

Sheebler grew fat on Shifter business. He would sell the same reservations over and over again. He seldom missed a trick.

ONCE a destructive meteorite dropped into one of the outer camps at Oil Plains, killing several primitive tribesmen who had come from a far-off land. "The falling stones have found us!" The contagious superstition played into Sheebler's hands. Rich Oriental princes went scurrying to him for reservations, depositing their fine jewels into his treasury.

His wealth multiplied to proportions undreamed of. Millionaires, kings, treasurers of financial empires, thieves—all poured gold into his hands as the fear of tomorrow's death seized them. Any price for immediate passage! Sheebler's eyes began to gleam strangely. A maniacal gleam. Two passions were clashing desperately within him—to flee and to stay.

To flee, for a torturing fear lashed him constantly. Every glint of the ghastly moon at night, every gray shadow it cast at noon day shrieked, escape!—escape!—pack the treasure into a space ship and get off to Mars before it is too late! His maddening fear would not let him sleep. Through the dead of night he paced through his underground vaults, counting and recounting the boxes that were waiting for shipment.

But whenever he emerged from his treasure catacombs to see the lines of fear crazed people—to hear them cry at him to take their money and deliver them to Mars, the other passion recaptured him. He must stay—stay to the last minute and bleed these silly people to the finish. Stay until the moon scorched against the earth's atmosphere, then fly to safety with his untold riches.

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He heard that the giant transmitter of Oil Plains was nearly ready. If it should be successful his harvest would end. If it should fail—

Night after night he sent forth bombing parties instructed to commit sabotage on the giant machine. They could not get through. He lashed them with vituperation and sent them back. They did not return. His man power was dwindling. He was losing his grip on his workers—and on himself.

Rebellion seethed through his offices and in his space ships. He used threats less and outright murder more. But violence is a boomerang: his own life was threatened by embittered workers. Fear heaped upon fear. He lived by the gun and the force of his mad will. Inwardly he was frightened and sick.

His eyes fastened upon Vivian as she alighted from a space ship. She and the pilot were followed by Clayface, the hulking uniformed guard. Sheebler called him aside.

"Your ship will have to do without a hostess until I give you further notice. I'm keeping Miss Carruth here."

"What's the idee?" asked Clayface in a jealous tone. For an answer he took a quick slap across the face.

"Shut up and take your orders."

As Vivian entered the dining room of the Interplanetary hotel she was aware that it was not Clayface who was following her. It was Damon D. Sheebler. He had regained his smoothest manner. He seated her at a secluded table, ordered dinners, and came to the point. He was transferring her. His nervous condition required the services of a trained nurse; her qualifications entitled her to the position. Her salary would be high, and she would be guaranteed passage to Mars with him in ample time to escape the final collapse. After outlining her responsibilities he added bluntly that she must not expect to go beyond the confines of Interplanetary Headquarters.

"You mean I'm to be a prisoner here?" she flared.

"Not a prisoner, my dear. A trusted employee," he replied in a saccharin tone. "This is an honor to which you are entitled because of your excellent services, your pleasing manners, and—I might add—your beauty. Don't you think you might learn to like it here?"

"No," said Vivian.

"I advise you to try," he said warmly. He led her to her quarters. "You'll be very comfortable here. Unfortunately you will have to be your own housekeeper, as the maids have deserted the Interplanetary Hotel to join the mad crowds at Oil Plains. You've heard of the outrageous scheme of Professor Buchanan, I presume."

"Yes," said Vivian.

"Bubble," said Sheebler. "Simply a bubble. I wouldn't give it a thought. It's crazy. It's so crazy it's funny—millions of people swarming around, simply to be duped. Crowd psychology."

Vivian was silent.

"Well?" Sheebler roared in a burst of temper.

"Yes, it's very funny," said Vivian. "It's perfectly ridiculous, of course."

SHEEBLER eyed her intently, as if he had caught a false note in her voice. "It *would* be funny—if it wasn't for that damned assistant of Buchanan's" he said sullenly.

"You mean—"

"Fellow by the name of Lattimer. Used to be a pilot of mine until his brain began to sprout too many theories. If the professor's harebrained scheme ever *should* come to anything—it'll be on account of him," he snarled. "And to think I had lots of chances to kill him . . . lots of perfect

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chances—"

Vivian saw his hand go to his flushed cheek. He was still remembering the blow Ray had once given him. He glared at her. "What are you looking at?"

"I was—just thinking," said Vivian quietly; then grasping for words that would allay his suspicions, she added, "Then you believe their machine might work?"

"No!" Sheebler roared like a beast in pain. "Didn't I just tell you—"

"E-E-E-MERGENCY BROAD-CAST! E-E-E-MERGENCY BROAD-CAST!"

Sheebler paled as the heavy voice of the speaker cut in.

"The giant radio at Oil Plains is now sending people through to Mars free of charge. The first passengers to arrive have just communicated with the Earth, announcing that they reached Mars without injury. Please help to spread the news to everyone. There will be time for all . . ."

Crash!

Sheebler had seized a chair and smashed it against the loud speaker. He raced out the door, screaming "Cut that off! Cut that off! For God's sake—" The air went blue.

Vivian seized her opportunity. Her suitcase was in the room. She shed her hostess uniform and got into street clothes in no time. She slipped through the corridors. She picked her way, fearful that she would run into Sheebler. Suddenly as the loud speakers choked off, Sheebler's snarl sounded just ahead of her, "Quick, God's sakes, give me a hook-up!" he barked at one of his lackeys.

She sped the other way. She reached the lobby. It was in turmoil. People were rushing with bag and baggage for the street exits. The underground streets were jamming with cars and buses. A stampede of Shifters bound for Oil Plains—her chance to shake the Interplanetary Lines at last.

She was on the heels of the outpouring crowd. She had almost reached the street door when a new voice roared through the loud speakers.

"E-E-E-MERGENCY BROAD-CAST! E-E-E-MERGENCY BROAD-CAST! The giant radio at Oil Plains is *not* working. Everyone who enters it is killed instantly Our earlier announcement was a mistake. You are warned to go to Mars only by space s ips!"

"Sheebler!" Vivian gasped. "It's trickery."

As the announcement sounded over and over, the angry mob halted, groaned with anger, turned and surged back into Interplanetary headquarters. The tide swept Vivian back into the lobby. A hand clutched her wrist. She looked up into the grinning visage of Clayface.

"Hi, Baby. Where you goin' so fast? Not runnin' away by any chance? Cause if the big boss don't want you, I've got a space ship waitin'. But I'm thinkin' he wants you. Le's go see."

CHAPTER V

Migration to Mars

THE hum of magnificent generators sounded over the countryside. Their song had begun, never to cease until the moon should crash down to remold the earth. Back of the spinning turbines was half a year's fuel supply moving to its destination automatically.

The power age had never witnessed a spectacle so colossal as this before. Within the vortex of converging tracks the giant transmitters loomed like a symmetrical mountain. Billions of glittering points bristled over its rounded surface. Somewhere in unseen depths

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the magic of matter disintegration was taking place. Through the blue aura above, channelized radio waves sped on their way.

Across fifty million miles of space another giant instrument of kindred sensitivity zoomed with a song of matter synthesis. From Oil Plains, Earth, to Buchanan, Mars—four and one-half minutes. From life to disintegration to radio waves to reintegration to life—all in a moment of oblivion! It seemed incredible—almost as incredible as the telephone once had been.

As one convincing report after another was communicated back from the newly-arrived on Mars, thousands of people rushed boldly through the ramps and into the open cars. Others hung back; some were afraid, some were fascinated by the terrific exhibition of power before their eyes, many were bewildered by the realization that at last they were leaving the Earth forever. And there were those who had no intention of leaving; the predictions of the coming catastrophe meant nothing to them, for they were victims of moon fever, a strange romantic malady induced by the spectacular splendor of the hovering moon.

The day after the first rush of stampeders had stormed off to Mars, the great organized migration began in full force. Loud speakers had assured the waiting masses that the machine would handle passengers at the unbelievable speed of fifty million a day. Skeptics laughed, but eye-witnesses who had reviewed the grand facilities for loading did not doubt it.

Twelve tracks built to the stupendous gauge of two hundred feet led in from twelve angles, tangents to the vortex of tracks that spiralled about the transmitter. The odd-shaped cars were simply rolling floors with high backs. They eased along the miles of loading docks like so many magnified park benches, moving forward so slowly that a column of passengers could march onto them through the open ends or automobiles could drive on.

The loaded cars moved independently. As they converged from all directions at the spiralled vortex, they sped up—faster—faster. The roller coaster effect caused constant screaming and shouting of passengers at the point where the cars raced down the incline.

One car every second was caught up like a mammoth lug to ride over the gigantic drum that hummed with high speed. One car every second flew through the detection area of the transmitter, then coasted forth on its return journey—empty.

The reverse of this process was taking place simultaneously fifty million miles away. Under artificially controlled gravitational and atmospheric conditions the cars rolled forth loaded down with amazed and terrified migrants. On they came by the thousands; dazed, scared, mystified; some screaming and fainting, but none injured.

The engineers of two planets thrilled to their triumph, thanked their luck that they had lived in the age of this wonderful invention, planned and schemed for its future possibilities. The visionary Buchanan raved like a drunken prince. Victory! The race against time was won!

STRANGELY, the one person whose genius had done most to drive the construction of the giant radio was not gloating with his fellows. He was donning coat and hat, counting the minutes it would take him to drive to Interplanetary Headquarters.

These past weeks of slave-driving labor had been unbroken by any word from Vivian. His friends on Mars had failed to get any trace of her. He

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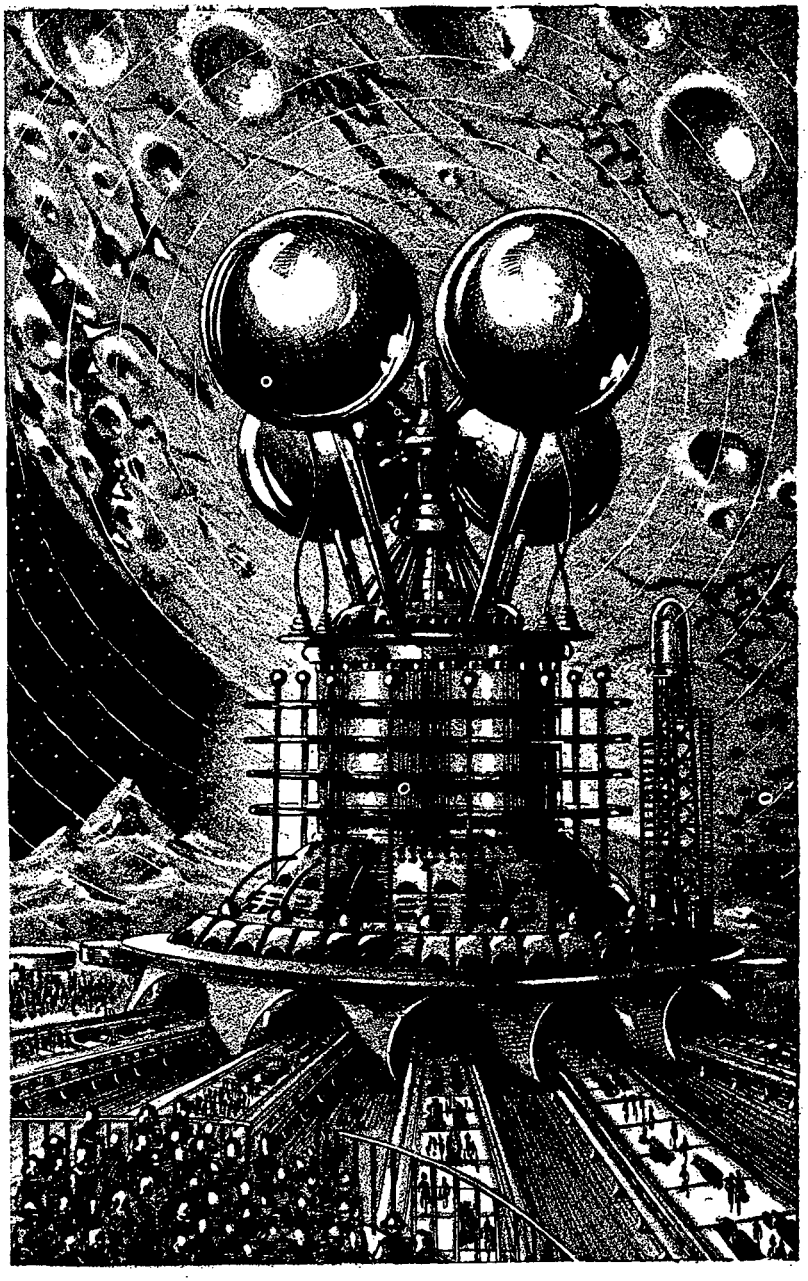

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must storm Sheebler's fortress. Only the pressure of millions of families who had pinned their faith on him had prevented his doing so before. He would not delay another minute. If that damned Sheebler had refused to let her quit her job—

He darted down the long hallway toward his car. Suddenly he heard a strange sound—a low buzz—under the hum of the generators. He stopped, dismayed, thinking of Professor Buchanan's oft-quoted phrase, "No machine is perfect."

He started on but was stopped again, this time by a call over the loud speakers.

"Lattimer wanted in department twenty-seven immediately. Emergency. Technical difficulties. Lattimer wanted immediately. Department twenty-seven."

Why couldn't he have been deaf at that moment? He swore to himself. Why did every technical difficulty demand his attention? Weren't there other engineers who could keep this machine going? He whirled about and rushed to answer the emergency. Other things would have to wait, for he was an indispensable part of this machine.

Days and nights of ceaseless supervision. Into the shadow of the deadline.

The two hundred and thirty-ninth day after Buchanan's famous declaration found the white haired professor speeding back from the Rocky Mountain Observatory toward Oil Plains. A microphone was before his lips.

"Tomorrow," he repeated over and over. "Tomorrow is the day. Come to Oil Plains and board a radio transit car at once. Tomorrow the giant radio will be destroyed. The moon will break within the next few hours. The crash will come sometime tomorrow. Tomorrow . . ."

Radio warnings shot across the continent. The camps surrounding Oil Plains during the preceding weeks were gone now. Last minute migrations from foreign lands had come and gone. Straggling parties were still dribbling in from all corners of the earth. How many thousands or millions of persons yet remained scattered over the face of the globe powerless to cope with the coming catastrophe, no one would ever know.

A few hundred people still lingered at the radio and space-ship centers—people who, like Ray Lattimer, had been kept busy up to the eleventh hour.

"All services will cease at midnight tonight," came the emergency broadcast. "No radio broadcasts after midnight tonight, no telephones, no buses or trains. If you plan to drive to Oil Plains be sure your fuel needs are taken care of at once, for no services will be available after midnight tonight. Lights may go off any time after midnight. You are advised to go to Oil Plains at once . . ."

Midnight found Ray Lattimer at the radio telegraph catching a last minute message. All of his feverish efforts to locate Vivian had been fruitless. He had been virtually tied to the giant transmitter. Several of his friends, realizing his predicament, had offered to help. They had promised, on departing for Mars, to find her at any cost. One after another had reported no success. Now a last minute message from a friend told the story:

"Have learned from space pilots that Vivian is still on earth in private employ of Sheebler."

RAY dropped the instruments, flew out of the room, sprinted for his high powered motor car. Though untouched for weeks, it was ready for instant action. Into the streets it shot—across the underground highways—up onto the surface. No use fighting the

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final rush of traffic pouring in from Interplanetary. Better to take a chance on the meteorites. He would do the fifty mile surface stretch in a few minutes.

Even on this little used highway the eleventh hour traffic was active. For the first few miles he saw lights along the loading docks. Here was the outer end of one of the twelve tracks, where the chain of radio transit cars rose to the surface and began the slow drift back to the giant transmitter. How long would all these wheels keep turning without his supervision? He wondered. The engineers had all gone now. It was up to the automatic controls to carry on until the shattering blow of the moon came.

Under the light of that sullen orange sky monster, Ray could see a few trucks and cars, and here and there a person loaded down with luggage, boarding the open cars. If he could find Vivian, he would come back this way, drive onto a car, and wait. If he could find Vivian—

His heart was sick. How had this fatal thing slipped up on him? He had been so hypnotized by the swift succession of demands upon him, so fatigued from the endless rush, that he had lost touch with his own personal life. Would Vivian still be alive? Would she still be—his?

As he held the car wide open a curious sensation came to him. The moonlight over the landscape had flickered. Instinctively his eyes flashed upward to the gorgeously shaded ball that filled the whole eastern sky. Its upper edge was eclipsed by the earth. By morning it would be directly overhead, he reflected—if morning came.

Another flicker, and with a thrill of terror, for Ray's eyes caught the spread of a new fissure. Then another. Gradually a vast section ripped from the swollen face, shook free, and appeared to be floating outward toward the earth. Man's moments on his home planet were numbered.

Ray dodged an oncoming truck and whizzed on toward Interplanetary.

THE lights still burned at Interplanetary Headquarters. Deep in the catacombs below the hotel Sheebler had stopped dead in his tracks before the moonometer. He stood as if frozen, his eyes glassy, his lips quivering. In the deathly silence of the room the instrument was shrieking danger.

For minutes the unnerved man was paralyzed. His mad will refused to believe that the long dreaded moment was at hand. None of the emergency broadcasts of recent days had reached his ears. They angered him so, they were so demoralizing to his trade, so insulting to his own theories that he had thrown the switches.

Fighting out of his nightmare of fear, whipping his terror-stricken body into action, he dashed through the passageways that led to his treasury. A gleam returned to his eyes as he surveyed the stacks of metal boxes.

He glanced at his watch. Only a little after midnight. Good. There would be time.

He snapped a switch. A conveyor belt along the floor began to roll. He snapped it off, satisfied. It would enable him to load his treasury into a space ship in half an hour. Then he would be off. The only space ship in port was scheduled to leave at daybreak. He would load it and go at once. Passengers and crew be damned. No need to tell anyone his plans; no one except the pilot. Keep a gun on him. That would be easy. Clayface had worked it for weeks.

Clayface—yes, he would come in handy too. Sheebler would put him

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down here in the vault to feed these cases onto the conveyor belt. When the last box rolled into the ship's hold, Clayface would be through. He could stay on earth to greet the moon. By that time Sheebler would have a nice start for Mars with no one but the pilot and the treasure chests for company—

CHAPTER VI

The Moon Breaks Up

HIS thoughts broke. The muffled sobs of a girl's voice sounded dimly through the hollow passageway. That Carruth girl. Damned little tiger. He'd never been able to get his hands on her. There was too much space in this hotel, now that everyone was deserting. She was as elusive as a wild bird. But she hadn't escaped—he had seen to that. Maybe these weeks behind a locked door had tamed her a little.

She was in terror. Even before he had the door unlocked she was pleading with him to take her to Oil Plains. She had counted the days. She knew the Earth's doom was at hand.

She backed away from the door as her captor flung it open.

"Come out," he said. She obeyed. He directed her toward the vault. She stopped at the doorway of the treasury, saw the cases piled high, and wondered if ever in the world so much wealth had been stored in one place.

"In a few minutes I'm taking it to Mars," he said, and noticing her surprise, added "No one knows it but you. I'm telling you because you're going with me."

Instinctively she drew back. He advanced, seized her wrist. "I tell you you're going with me!" he rasped through clenched teeth. His insane glare was upon her. Terrorized, she slowly nodded her assent.

Then footsteps thudded through the hallway, and a hulky uniformed man strode into view. Clayface.

"Well?" Sheebler roared. Then, as his thoughts whirled, his manner changed. "I was just going to send for you, Clayface. I want to see you."

The guard strode up to his superior. The usual grin on his face was missing. In its place was the fright of a child.

"Have you seen the moon?" he gasped.

Sheebler eyed him fiercely. "What's the matter?"

"They sent me in to tell you we're going," he rattled, "and you can come if you want to. And you, Baby," turning to Vivian, "I came to get you. We're set to go off in five minutes—"

"You're what—?" Sheebler shrieked. "You can't take off till daybreak."

"Yeah?" smiled Clayface. "The instruments are set, and it won't be five minutes. Your workers are all aboard and they aren't carin' whether you come or not—"

"Why the damned—who told them they could leave? I'll—" He reached for his revolver.

"You won't get anywhere with that. They're loaded up and they're goin'. And so am I. Come on, Baby," he caught Vivian's hand and started.

"Wait a minute!" Sheebler commanded. "Help me get these boxes aboard. We've got to take them to Mars." He snapped on the switch and set the conveyor belt into motion as he barked orders frantically, holding a gun on the two of them.

Clayface did not move. He stood in wonderment as his surprised eyes floated over the piles of metal cases. "Gollies," he said dreamily, "is all of that money?"

Sheebler stiffened. "Get at it, I tell you!" He flourished the revolver frantically.

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Clayface shook off his dazed expression. "No time for that. We're weighted down now. Come on!" Disregarding the maniacal gleam in Sheebler's eyes, Clayface tightened his grip on Vivian's hand, ready to start back down the passageway.

"Stop or you'll die in your tracks," Sheebler barked.

The uniformed man turned about carelessly as if reluctant to obey orders, grunting, "Hell, have it your own way." Starting toward the cases, he suddenly crowded his threatener onto the conveyor belt. Sheebler's feet shot out from under him. Clayface and the girl were through the door and into the maze of catacombs.

Sheebler leaped to his feet. He swung the vault door behind him; it would lock automatically. Gun in hand, he ran in the direction of the retreating footsteps.

His treasure, the ruling passion of his life, had been revealed before the eyes of two persons. They would not live to tell about it, no matter what happened to it—or to the earth, the moon, the stars, or himself.

He knew the shortcuts through these catacombs. His errand would require only a minute's time and two bullets. There would still be time to board the space ship.

RAY LATTIMER, chasing from one vacant hallway to another, at last caught the sounds of voices. He bounded through the catacombs toward the clatter of footsteps. As he cut through a dark passageway toward a lighted corridor, the concussion of a shot shook the air. A large uniformed figure slumped on the floor ahead of him.

That scream was Vivian's! Her running form passed before him.

Back of her came the mad-eyed Sheebler, leveling a gun at her.

Ray's hand gripped an automatic.

Crack!

Sheebler's weapon jumped out of his hand and clattered across the floor. The furious maniac leaped at Ray; he would have flown at a speeding locomotive. Ray's second shot went wild as he went down under the impact of the madman. His automatic bounded out of his hand as he struck the floor.

Vivian's scream stopped short at the realization that this was Ray. Where he had come from, how he had known of her peril she had no time to question. Her eyes fell on the nearest revolver. She started for it, stepping over the dying uniformed creature that blocked the narrow corridor.

She could not get through. The two fighting demons rolled and bounced back and forth between the walls in terrific combat.

Then suddenly the rain of blows ceased. Ray stood half crouched, breathing heavily, his bleeding knuckles at his mouth. The glassy eyed Sheebler lay on his back, his hands cupped upward.

Ray picked up both weapons.

The trembling girl clutched him half in fear, half in joy. Ray kissed her eyes, now flooding with tears—her lips, now smiling. She clung to him.

Sheebler breathed huskily. His swollen eyes narrowed; his murderous face was tense. Ray studied him sharply. The prone man made no effort to move, but Ray's hand tightened on a revolver.

"You've come to an end," he said.

Vivian restrained him. "It isn't necessary. After the millions of lives you've saved, Ray—"

"I can afford to lose this one. After all—"

"If you're thinking of Lane—"

"I'm thinking of you."

"I haven't been harmed, Ray. I'm

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just a little frightened. But if you hadn't come when you did—"

A heavy explosive sound resounded through the catacombs.

"The last space ship—taking off," Vivian breathed. "Is—is there still time to get to Oil Plains?"

A minute later they were rolling up out of the subway in Ray's powerful car.

"We'll be among the last to leave," he said grimly. "The professor and all the force have gone. It's high time we got aboard."

AS they came out into the open Vivian gave a shocked cry. She had caught first sight of the falling moon. Holding the car wide open on the empty highway, Ray turned for a quick glimpse. His foot went harder against the accelerator. The spectacle was unnerving. A vast section of yellow moon with deep black edges was coasting down out of the skies. Smaller fragments around it were also floating earthward. A second and a third glance gave proof that the flying bodies were enlarging visibly as they plummeted toward earth.

Vivian was breathless. "Will the transmitter still be working?"

"We'll soon know," Ray answered through set teeth. "The radio waves won't be disturbed—but there's no telling how soon earthquakes may be tearing up everything. This old globe will probably start ripping and thrashing over the surface before that chunk of moon ever strikes. When that happens, the giant transmitter will quit cold."

Ray took a curve at a dangerous speed, and Vivian saw a long loading platform stretching ahead of them. The endless row of open cars was moving gently.

"Deserted," said Ray. "Everybody's gone."

"There's another automobile following us. I see its lights," said Vivian, looking through the rear window. Her heart beat wildly as she added, "Do you think it might be Sheebler?"

Ray didn't answer. Inwardly he cursed himself for letting a bullet go to waste. There would be difficulties enough on Mars without Sheebler. Better that the moon strike this instant—

Ray slowed down almost to a stop, turned shortly, coasted a few feet, then cut off the engine. They were aboard a slowly rolling transit car. Their fate rested in the hands of time.

The great fragment of moon seemed almost upon them now. The earth's shadow spread blackness across the upper side of it. Then at once the hues began to turn. The outer edges changed from black shadows into a dull red glow—brighter and brighter. The whole magnificent body was inflamed with a brilliant red that glowed over the landscape.

As it scorched through the earth's atmosphere it grew more scintillating—a blinding white. The approaching car lights paled. Warmth was pouring down. There could be only a few seconds left now.

The rolling floor bearing the motor car, within which the terrified couple huddled, accelerated into lightning speed and flew as if through space. Objects that Ray had helped to create swept past so swiftly that the kaleidoscopic scene meant nothing.

Then there was a sudden retarding.

"We're stopping. Something's gone wrong. We're sunk!"

Slower—slower—they were easing along through a great enclosure now. Nothing of this scene was familiar to Ray—nothing except the bystander who hailed them as they rolled by. It was Professor Buchanan.

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"You've made it!" he shouted. "You've just made it."

So this was Mars. Sometime in those flashing seconds just passed, they had come through. They breathed again.

A moment later they were on the unloading platform listening to a blow by blow radio account of the Earth's catastrophe as it was being witnessed by astronomers on Mars. A spectacle in the distant heavens.

The procession of radio transit cars brought forth only two more objects that had jumped the sea of space before the Earth's giant transmitter was struck dead. They were an unpleasant sight; nevertheless, both Vivian and Ray experienced a curious feeling of relief at their appearance. One was the top half of a fine motor car—sheared off clean. The other was the upper half of the body of Damon D. Sheebler—stone dead.

Ray looked down into the face of the lovely girl in his arms. There was no fear in her eyes now—only joy and hope and pride.

SUICIDE SQUADRONS OF SPACE

(Concluded from page 25)

down hard and often. Dick howled:

"Craig, I'll bust every bone in your body! I'll—I'll—Ouch! Hey, cut it out! That hurts!"

"Give the password, son," Starke barked, whaling away, "or murder it gives!"

"Uncle!" Dick shouted desperately. *"Uncle!"*

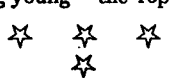
Starke gave him one more whack that raised dust and blisters, and then let up. Dick stumbled to his feet, very red in the face and very sheepish.

Craig Starke got up and caught him by the ear. He led the protesting young space pilot over to where Bea Walters was standing, enjoying every minute of it.

"If you think war is hell," Starke grinned, "try marriage!" And he gave the youngster a shove which sent him straight into the girl's arms. Then he slammed out the door. . . .

"I suppose this is romance," Dick said ruefully as he wrapped one arm around the girl and rubbed his breeches tenderly with the other hand.

"Well," said Bea Walters coyly, looking into his eyes, "you've got to learn the ropes sometime!"



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MYSTERY on Planetoid Ten

By JAMES NORMAN

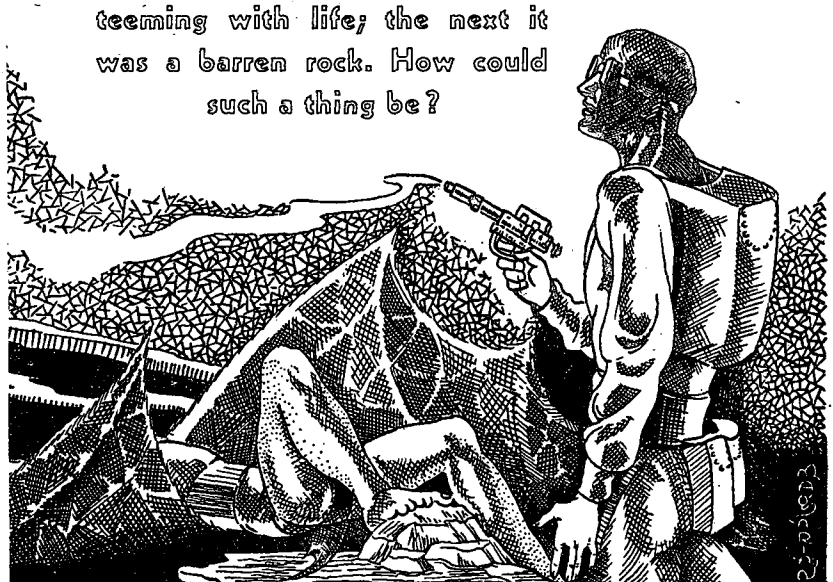
"ATTENTION!—Ladies and Gentlemen," the newsreel commentator's rich voice boomed through the theater. "A Spacefoto Company camera scout has finally cracked through the dangerous asteroid belt guarding mysterious Planetoid Ten . . .

"We interrupt our regular program, bringing you a surprise showing of the *only* pictures actually taken there!"

As the voice paused, an excited murmur ran through the theater. A thousand pairs of eyes centered upon the all-color screen, waiting, anxious. Planetoid Ten had suddenly become news, big news. It had captured the popular fancy of the world.

"A few days ago," the commentator's clear-cut voice continued, "a competing news service, Telanews Incorporated, released pictures supposedly taken by Explorer Egon Snow." The commentator's voice paused, dramati-

One minute this crazy world was teeming with life; the next it was a barren rock. How could such a thing be?



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cally. "Those Telanews shots were faked! We have definite proof that Snow never returned with such pictures . . . Egon Snow died on Planetoid Ten!"

A sudden, startled gasp of surprise swept through the theater.

Then a series of starlit pictures flashed upon the screen, showing the surface of a craggy, barren planetoid. A single small moon hurtled over the horizon, throwing faint illumination upon the torn hull of a space-ship.

An excited thrill ran through the commentator's voice.

"Planetoid Ten! We landed here with tremendous difficulty. Here, at last, we located Snow's wrecked space-ship. The explorer's body could not be located. He probably wandered away from his ship. It is certain that he died —for there is absolutely no air here . . .

"And nowhere is there a sign of the luxuriant plant life, the fabulous flying men or strange animals that the Telanews Corporation would have the world believe exists on Planetoid Ten. It's a bleak, foreboding land . . ."

"Liar!" a voice challenged from the rear of the theater. "That's a damn lie! Snow never faked a picture. Nor did Telanews."

There was a sudden commotion. The picture on the screen stopped and the lights went on. A husky young man with a petulant curve to his lips became the center of attention.

"Who do you think you are?" someone jeered.

"I'm Stan Leigh, Telanews camera scout."

Another taunting voice cut in:

"Okay, Leigh. Give us the low-down on how your company faked those Planetoid Ten pictures last week?"

Stan Leigh vaulted over a row of seats and grabbed the speaker by the collar. "That's a rotten lie," he growled. "Take that back or I'll—"

"Fake! Fake!" A dozen voices burst forth in unison.

"He ought to be shot. The whole bunch of them ought to be thrown in jail. Fakers."

The spirit of mob action swept through the theater as men crowded closer upon Leigh. Irate voices rasped at him. Angry fists shook before his face.

Suddenly a squad of gaudily dressed ushers swooped down the aisle and closed in upon the center of the disturbance. Someone pushed. Leigh's fist lashed out, connecting with a beefy jaw. Then hands grabbed him.

"Let me go!" Leigh shouted.

A moment later he was rushed up the aisle and tossed unceremoniously upon the Times Square pavement in front of the theater. Six husky ushers brushed their uniforms and stood there to see that he didn't come back.

"You guys just stick around," Leigh called back at them. "I'll be around soon as I get myself stinking mad."

With that he dusted himself off and made a bee-line for the Telanews offices, his anger mounting with each second that passed.

WILLIAM HARP, general manager of Telanews Incorporated, was swallowing his eighth bicarbonate tablet when Stan burst into the offices.

"Oh, my God!" Harp groaned. "For Heaven sakes, Leigh, get out! Don't bother me!"

"Who the devil's bothering you?" snapped Stan. "I've got something to talk to you about."

Harp made a helpless, tragic gesture, indicating the late editions of the newspapers scattered upon his desk. The banner head, with its ink still damp, screamed:

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PLANETOID HOAX—EXPLORER DEAD

"It's terrible," said Harp. "Snow was a fine man. It's a tragic loss, but I can't understand why he did this to us?"

"What?"

Harp suddenly snorted. "Look at this!"

He seized a pile of telegrams and canceled contracts, throwing them at Leigh.

"That," said Harp, "is where we stand. The corporation is on the verge of being ruined. It's serious. We've lost sixty percent of our contracts because of this Spacefoto exposé and people are already hinting that we're responsible for Snow's death."

Leigh's boss walked to the office window and groaned again.

Six stories below, upon the sheer wall of a glastex office building, a television screen re-showed the Spacefoto exposé that Stan had protested against in the theater. Thousands of people riding along the suspended highways were drinking it in.

"Imagine," said Harp, "Snow sending us a feature like that Planetoid Ten series. How was I to know it's a barren planetoid? Sure the picture was good—but it backfired. Did he fake it?"

Stan's eyes flashed a look of sudden anger at his boss.

"Snow was our best man," he said sharply. "He's not that kind of a guy. He spent plenty of time out there digging up odd features for Telanews. He's honest and I'm sticking by him."

Harp fastened his owlish gaze upon Stan. He shrugged helplessly.

"I'm thinking of the company too," he said. "We're faced with complete ruin. We'll have to close our offices unless we can prove to the public's satisfaction that Snow's pictures weren't faked. How are we going to do it? It's driving me mad!"

Stan pushed his gesticulating boss aside and stared through the window. Suddenly he turned to Harp, saying:

"Where the hell could Snow have gotten fake props to make a picture on that planetoid? You yourself said he brought the shot back to our Venus office and disappeared again." Stan lowered his voice, adding, "*Maybe you know where he is.* Maybe you cooked this gag up yourself."

"Forget it," said Harp. "This is serious."

"Damn serious," Leigh answered. "I didn't like the looks of Snow's spacecruiser in the Spacefoto reel. If he had crashed on the planetoid the prow would have dug in . . . It didn't!"

Mr. Harp jumped as if he had been struck by a bolt of lightning. "You mean you think he's—"

HARP put his two pudgy hands on Leigh's shoulders. "Leigh," he half-pleaded, "I want you to go out there . . . Planetoid Ten . . . Find out for certain. You'll be performing a public duty."

Stan shrugged the man's hands aside.

"What a sweet, public-minded citizen you are," he answered sarcastically. "You probably told Snow something like that before you sent him off into that death-trap!"

"Stop that!" Harp cried, his face reddening. "You're through!"

Stan straightened up, a queer expression flickering across his face.

"Say that again?" he asked.

"You're fired!" Harp snapped.

For an instant, Leigh stared at his boss. A hard line of determination was set across his mouth. Then he stepped toward the door.

"Okay. I'm through," he said, turning at the door. "But you haven't heard

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the end of this."

"Wait," cried Harp. He ran to the door, stopping Leigh. "Wait a minute, boy. I didn't mean it that way."

Although distrustful of the sudden, solicitous change in his boss, Stan halted, waiting. Harp couldn't afford to have his second best camera scout demanding a public investigation of the Snow case.

"Have you seen Egon Snow's daughter?" Harp suddenly asked.

"No. Why?"

Harp shrugged.

"Well, we haven't heard from her. I think she was along with Snow."

"Why the devil didn't you say so!" Stan snapped with irritation.

A worried frown knitted his brow. Tanya Snow, the pretty, vivacious daughter of the explorer was in trouble. That hit Stan like a stunning blow. He had already had ideas about Tanya, though most of them were still in the day-dream stages.

Suddenly he grabbed Harp's desk-phone.

"Hello," he shouted. "Give me the spaceport . . . no . . . here, Harp! You tell them to get my cruiser in shape, supplies, course, oxygen."

He shoved the phone into his boss' hand.

"What are you going to do?" Harp gasped.

"What am I going to do?" said Stan impatiently. "I'm going after Snow and Tanya. That's what!"

"But they're—"

"Shut up. I'll bring them back because I don't think they're dead."

A look, both crafty and doubtful, glowed in Harp's owlish eyes.

"Good," he said. "You'll get a promotion if you do. But you've got to promise to bring them back if you find them. You sign this contract. They've got to come back!"

GUNNING his little space-cruiser until the rocket dial indicated full percussion, Stan Leigh set his eyes straight ahead upon the dark, strange surface looming in the distant void.

"Crazy planetoid!" he muttered.

Planetoid Ten had been the last body discovered in the Sirius, north-ecliptic tangent. It revolved around the sun, following a staggered, elliptical course which had at first astonished Earth astronomers.

A hundred miles off the planetoid, Leigh encountered the strangest marvel in all the heavens—the asteroid belt. A hundred thousand spinning bodies that formed a kind of outer shell around the inner planetoid.

"Here goes," Leigh mumbled tensely, gritting his teeth and jerking the controls. He cut the gravs until the tiny cruiser tilted suddenly and dived headlong, screaming toward the belt. "Black asteroids—who could have thought of that!"

With a steady, iron hand, he guided the ship into the only known channel through the belt. Dark masses shot by, some frighteningly close to the portholes.

The little cruiser gave a sudden lurch, rocking in its course. Leigh jammed the controls to the right. Sweat poured from his brow. A jagged mass tore against the cruiser side, ripping part of the port-rocket jets.

There was no time to set the controls to automatic and inspect the damage. From the way the cruiser still responded to the controls Leigh judged that it had not been too disastrous. But it had been close; too close for comfort!

The ship burst beneath the asteroid blanket in full view of the tiny planetoid.

Leigh stared in astonishment at the utter bleakness of the landscape as he

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leveled off the cruiser and skimmed within a half mile of the rugged surface. A sense of dismay seized him. No body in the universe could be like this. Not even the moon!

"I've been a damn fool!" he thought. "Trusted Snow too much. I should have believed it when I saw those Spacefoto pictures."

At the end of a slight level he spotted a space-ship. Then he blinked incredibly. *There were two space-ships!* One, he recognized from the news reels. It was Snow's. The polished metal of both crafts shimmered in the weird moonlight.

Taking a turn over the field and operating now with compressed air jets instead of rocket blasts, Stan brought his cruiser down with a scudding slide: It stopped a few yards from Snow's ship. As he let himself out of the air-lock, he took the precaution to slip a Seabold Heat gun into his belt.

His space-suit ballooned around his body and he knew, from the atmospheric indicator, that the air content on Planetoid Ten's surface was at absolute zero. And yet, strangely, the mean temperature wasn't as low as it should have been.

Suddenly he stopped! He stared in astonishment at Snow's abandoned ship. It had not crashed. *The ship was dismantled!*

The hull plates had been taken off; and taken off carefully. The air-lock door was gone, pin-bolts and all. The machinery within the compartments had also been taken—the air compressors, generators and even the electric stove.

The strange desolation, the constant silence and unanswerable questions that shrouded Snow's ship brought an odd feeling creeping up the base of Stan's spine.

"Where is Snow? Who took the ship apart?" Leigh muttered to himself.

HE could not help but shudder as he moved toward the second space-cruiser that stood a short distance away, silent and mysterious. He glanced to the left and right, his senses alert, conscious of some hidden menace lurking in the craggy shadows of the planetoid.

The second space-cruiser was a newer model, a long bullet-like hull. Cautiously, he edged around it, finding nothing. Then he pulled out his heat gun, gripping it tightly, while with his right hand he touched the ship's air-lock button.

The door swung open with the low, hissing sound of escaping air. Stan rapped his gun against the metal cruiser wall.

A dead silence prevailed.

Hitching the heat gun in his hand, he clambered aboard and entered the control chamber of the silent ship.

"Hello! Anyone here?" he called through his portable radio transmitter.

A mute stillness mocked his words. Again the unbidden chill crept up his spine. Something hidden and unaccountable watched him. He whirled abruptly at the suspicion of a sound—there was nothing there but the gaping stillness.

Then, in the machine compartment, he stumbled and gasped with surprise as his hand touched the air compressor unit—it was still warm!

"My God!" he said hoarsely. "This ship hasn't been here more than a half hour!"

His mind raced madly, trying to fit things together. Who else could have dared navigate the asteroid belt? Were they out there watching him, waiting until he dropped his guard? What was the connection with Snow's dismantled cruiser? In the back of his mind,

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something warned him of trouble ahead.

A PINKING haze crowded the Planetoid Ten landscape when Stan stepped from the air-lock of the second space-ship. The sun was rising and he was able to make out the mysterious foot-prints that moved from the space-ship, off toward a low ridge of hill to his right.

At the same time, curls of vapor began rising from the planetoid's surface. It became apparent that the ground, instead of being rocky and bleak as at night, was a tremendous mass of dank pools, marshes and mud flats. Hard ridge-like paths criss crossed the marshes.

Amidst the curling vapors a strange thing happened. Leigh stared, wide-eyed and unbelieving.

Purplish plants and broad leaved ferns were sprouting all over the place, growing to gigantic heights. The change came with incredible swiftness; leaves opening, jungle verdage spreading out like the jerky spreading of a fan. Iridescent chains of soap-like bubbles floated among the leaves. Fetid mist crawled over the ferns while startling, fantastic insects buzzed heavily past.

"My Lord!" Leigh gasped. "There must be air here!"

He twisted the portable atmospheric gauge attached to his suit. The needle was crawling upward steadily; the atmospheric pressure seeming to increase with the rise of the blatant, disc-like sun.

He opened the trap on his quartz helmet, carefully sniffing the fetid air, not certain whether it was pure or poisonous. Then he jerked his helmet off and breathed in deeply.

"Air!" he cried. "Good, honest-to-God air!"

Leigh brushed the sweat from his brow. The feeling of dizziness within him wasn't merely the product of the incredible changes happening before his eyes . . . Stone's original pictures of the planetoid *were* right. And it also meant — Leigh's spine tingled — what other unknown, menacing things did this planetoid hold?

The foot-prints that he had been following soon vanished, swallowed up by the soft, marshy earth. The sun climbed and the planetoid began to stew. The going became difficult. Leigh strained to see through the lush, sudden jungle.

Then he stopped dead in his tracks.

Something moved just ahead. He jerked the Seabold Heat gun from his belt and advanced warily. A moment later his teeth clamped on a low whistle of surprise.

An indescribable native, a man if one could call it that, moved in a slight clearing ahead. Leigh blinked at the willow creature; at the yellow, moist skin, the webbed feet and platter like hands. The native's head was well proportioned, although it came to a bullet point at the top.

Leigh held his breath and crept up cautiously, his finger prepared to squeeze the heat gun trigger instantaneously.

Then he relaxed a little. The strange native gave little sign of being savage. At the moment he was busily using the edge of his platter hands to cut fruit from the fern trees.

Stan's eyes widened even more when the native piled the fruit into the tentacles of a balloon-like jellyfish that hovered in the air just above him. Suddenly the native clapped his hands sharply, sending the greenish jellyfish sailing off into the sky.

A twig snapped beneath Leigh's foot. The native whirled, startled. Upon seeing Leigh, the look of fear faded

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from his yellow face and something that might have passed for a smile appeared.

"You friend?" said the native in a twittering voice.

STAN gulped in astonishment. *That had been spoken in English.* It was the sort of pidgin English one hears on the frontier planets like Venus.

"Who in the blazes are you?" Stan demanded. "What are you?" he added in after-thought, "Man, woman or beast?"

The native abandoned the attempted smile as too difficult. "I . . . Moku . . . I, major-domo of all Mokus," he said

"Mokus?" said Stan.

"Mokus are people here," answered the native. "Fine people. Lot of us."

"Who taught you English?"

The native waved his platter hand in the direction of the hills, now obliterated by the wildly growing foliage. "Ister Noe," he replied.

"Noe?" Leigh kinked his brow.

"Like you, with white hair on chin," the native added, stroking an imaginary beard.

Suddenly Leigh grabbed the native. *"Snow! Mister Snow!*—Leaping comets! He's safe? Where is he?"

The native danced up and down on his webbed feet, which was the best he could do to express a certain amount of pleasure at having conveyed an idea. He pointed toward the hills again, twittering,

"Noe. Noe. Me, major-domo."

Leigh grasped the native's sloping shoulder and headed him in the general direction of the hills.

"You show me, pronto," he said. "The quicker I find Snow and Tanya, the faster we'll show the Spacefoto crowd what's what. We'll bust them wide open."

As the pair pushed through the dank undergrowth, the native who was known as Charlie exhibited certain startling qualities. He cut vines that fell across the path with his platter hands, almost as if they were machetes. Twice, Stan had to stop him from short-cutting right across the mud marshes on his webbed feet.

Stan tried to straighten a few points out as they went.

"What the devil is the second spaceship doing on the planetoid?" he asked Charlie.

The native looked puzzled.

"Only one Ister Noe here," he insisted. "Nobody else."

"You're crazy," Stan answered. "I saw the other ship. And what about Snow's daughter?"

"Ister Noe here alone," Charlie replied bluntly.

Stan felt perturbed. The native was positive that Snow was here alone. There was a tightening around Stan's heart when he realized that the girl was not with her father. Where could she be? He was sure that she had come to Planetoid Ten.

In the distance, the clear sound of flapping wings intruded upon the busy hum of the jungle.

Charlie stiffened, listening intently. A look of dismay, then anger rushed into his large eyes.

"Soors!" he cried. "Soors come take Moku women."

He raced across the swamp-flats, his broad, webbed feet flapping upon the mushy surface.

"Hey! Wait!" Stan shouted. "I can't cut across that damn stuff. Sink up to my teeth."

"Soors!" Charlie the Moku screamed in a high pitched voice.

LEIGH plunged after the native, picking a reckless path along the hard ridges that wove through the

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strange marshes. During a flashing instant he glimpsed a dozen strange flying creatures through the broken pattern of ferns overhead.

He came to the edge of a pampus-like field where the ground was quite solid. Then he stopped, gaping in astonishment. An uncontrollable chill ran down his spine.

A dozen weird, half-human, half-bat creatures circled in the air over the field. Leigh's blood ran cold at the sight of their hairy bodies, the kicking blunt legs, grasping arms and the stiff, beak-like stinger protruding from the snout of each creature.

They swooped down with a flapping of hideous, leathery wings, diving upon Charlie. The native ducked. A bat-man lunged at him, missed and flapped skyward. Charlie leaped to his feet again, steadying himself to face another plunging monster.

A second and third bat-creature swooped downward with whistling wings. Charlie cut at the first with his platter hands, slashing, whirling his arms like flashing knives.

The bat-man crashed into him, knocking him to the earth with a stunning blow. Charlie kicked madly, fighting with hands and feet. Suddenly a second person behind him charged the bat-man, beating the creature with a quartz space-helmet.

"Tanya!" Stan cried aghast.

With the words still tearing at his throat Stan charged across the clearing. A snap brought the heat gun twirling in his hands.

"Look out!" he roared, trying to divert the attack of the bat-men.

It worked. A bat-creature whirled in mid-air, flapping toward him with ungainly speed. Running at break-neck pace, Stan whipped up the gun muzzle. An orange burst of flame enveloped the weird creature. A horrible, agonized screech marked the earthward fall of the bat-man.

A sudden, tremendous blow struck Stan from behind. He reeled across the ground and felt the swoop of wings. Somehow he hung on to the heat gun, rolled madly to the side and came up on his knees.

He caught a glimpse of another creature diving sharply upon Charlie, suddenly swerving past his razor-edged hands, and seizing the girl. He heard Tanya's terrified scream.

"Charlie!" Stan yelled. "Save her!"

A wild flapping of wings drowned his cry of warning. The next instant Tanya was carried aloft, her slim body in the clutches of the hideous bat creature. She rained blows upon the *thing*, then suddenly her body became limp.

Leigh cursed and raised the heat gun.

"No! What the hell am I thinking of!" he said grimly, realizing the weapon would destroy both the girl and the ugly captor. He raged at himself, venting his frustrated anger at being unable to stop the bat-men as they wheeled away in the sky with their human prize.

"What the devil are they?" Leigh swore, shaking Charlie the Moku.

"Soors," the panting native gasped. "They want girl." A strange light suddenly crossed his face. "Who is girl?"

"Never mind," snapped Leigh. "Where are they taking her? Come on, we've got to follow them before they do her harm."

HE hooked the space helmet the girl had dropped in his belt and set off toward the jungle. Then Charlie blocked the way, putting his oversized platters against Leigh's chest.

"No go through jungle," he said. "Come night soon."

"Get out of my way," Stan snapped.

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"Come night," Charlie repeated worriedly.

"Move!" said Stan.

Charlie clapped his hands, making a sharp, pistol explosion sound.

Stan's muscles grew tense, his hand tightening on the heat gun. He glanced sharply around at the jungle expecting to see dozens of angry natives leap out, surrounding him. Then his mouth relaxed abruptly and he stared foolishly at two balloon-like jelly-fish that floated toward Charlie from over the jungle.

"What the hell is this?" he said.

"We go to Soor caves," Charlie answered excitedly. "Soors not there much in day. Soors no like men; only want women. Steal much Moku women. Kill Moku men."

A moist pair of green tentacles hooked themselves under Leigh's armpits. He felt his flesh crawl over his bones as he stared into the sober, colorless eyes of the weird, air-going fish. In another moment he was gently lifted into the air. Charlie was carried by the second jellyfish.

The floating jelly fish moved with amazing swiftness, being guided by sounds from Charlie's flat hands. Before reaching the ridge of hills jutting above the fetid everglade land, they swung to the left. A few minutes later they were circling over a strangely formed mountain.

"Soor's city," Charlie cried as they hovered above what appeared to be a conical volcano.

The jellyfish dropped with alarming speed, plummeting into the dark abyss for endless minutes. One instant a cry of warning formed upon Stan's lips when he thought the green jellyfish had lost its grip. The next second he had forgotten his fears as they plunged toward a broad, torchlit ledge.

Stan swept the ledge with one glance. At the far end there was a large tunnel opening. A Soor stood guard there, its ugly wings folded against its squat body like twin leathery umbrellas.

"Girl maybe in there," Charlie whispered.

"Okay, follow me," said Stan. He pulled out his heat gun and advanced toward the tunnel.

Suddenly the Soor-guard rushed across the ledge, wings outspread, flapping hideously. Stan halted an instant. He shot from the hip, a sizzling, orange streak of flame.

"Crisped the guy," he grunted at Charlie. "Now where? The hole, eh?"

The native nodded, trembling.

"You stay here," Leigh ordered. "See that our flying protoplasms don't run out on us."

With quickening pulse, Stan plunged into the mysterious underground city of caves and traced his way daringly through the maze of tunnels hewn from the soft, porous planetoid stone.

Walls of jagged black rock were lit by a dim, eldritch green glow that seemed to come from some mysterious element in the rock itself. Leigh's senses sharpened a hundredfold, his nerves standing on end as he penetrated the deserted byways of a strange world.

His uneasiness increased as he went deeper into the eerie caverns. He cursed himself for not having saved Tanya sooner. He'd never find her in this maze. He might be too late. The place was a trap.

Presently, almost before he could stop himself, he stumbled into a large, well lit cavern. He caught his breath sharply and a gasp of sheer astonishment escaped his throat . . . *Directly ahead, seated upon a crude, barbaric throne, was the girl—Tanya Snow!*

Stan grasped the scene in an instant. Tanya was surrounded by the fantastic Soors who were bowing before her,

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thumping their heads upon the cavern floor in some weird, savage ritual.

Near the throne, a gigantic bat-man, whose body had been painted hideously, turned from the bowing mob to the girl. As he approached her, the sharp, barb-like stinger protruding from his snout vibrated with an eerie, hissing sound. The bat-man came closer, while Stan stood there, his eyes glued upon the girl.

THE girl was beautiful, breathlessly beautiful, and yet she seemed unaware of her danger. She stared across the cavern, her dark hair framing a smooth oval face of madonnaesque proportions.

Leigh opened his mouth to shout a cry of warning. Suddenly he stopped. She was looking at him, almost staring through him. Then she pointed a bone sceptre at him. The immediate result was a commotion—but not in the manner Stan had expected.

A group of Soors thrashed toward the door, blocking that avenue of escape. Leigh, however, had seen another tunnel behind the throne. Where it went, he did not know, but he was prepared to take chances.

He leaped toward the throne and quickly grasped Tanya's hand.

"Come on," he shouted. "Quick—through the tunnel."

The girl jerked her arm away, staring at him oddly, refusing to move.

Before he was able to sweep her into his arms a savage circle of bat-men closed in on him, their heavy wings flailing madly, their sub-human faces contorted with rage.

Stan lashed out with his fist. It cracked mightily against a Soor. The beast crumbled. Stan reached for his heat gun but before his fingers touched the butt a coil of twisted rope tightened about him. He struggled, kicking vainly, straining to undo his arms. The rope coiled tighter and in a moment he was being lugged from the big chamber.

It was a very befuddled and angry Stan Leigh who tossed around in the narrow cave-prison a few minutes after the six Soors had dumped him there. If anyone had ever told him that Leigh was scheduled to lose a fight to a bunch of unarmed savages, he would have laughed.

But now he couldn't . . . That girl burned in his mind; an indelible picture of Tanya Snow, seated amidst those weird savages.

"Telanews and Spacefotos never got half the lowdown on this batty planetoid," he grumbled. "And the way I feel now, Old Man Harp won't get the other half."

He rolled violently upon the cavern floor, jerking at the twisted ropes that held his arms and legs. The binding grew tighter as he struggled. Finally he relaxed, allowing his mind to become the prey of overwhelming and disturbing thoughts.

"What the devil was Tanya Snow doing up there on the dais?" he asked himself bitterly. He had seen her fight the Soors before they had carried her away. "Now she's on their side. Am I nuts? And where is Egon Snow?"

Leigh groaned, almost as if the bundle of thoughts were too big to cram into his mind at the moment.

Presently he heard a scraping near the door of the prison-cave. Someone removing the stones that blocked the entrance. Stan shifted his position, watching the entrance. A strange feeling of expectancy ran through his body.

"You!" he gasped excitedly, seeing Charlie the Moku's head poke through the opening.

Charlie pressed a flat hand on his mouth, urging silence.

"Hurry," he whispered. He unfas-

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tened Stan's hands and legs. "We go pronto, pronto."

Leigh rubbed his wrists to bring back the circulation.

"Say, who's doing the rescuing around here? You or I?"

Charlie stared soberly.

"Pronto," he whispered. "Soors put you here to kill you. Soors kill all men; only want women alive."

"I'm going back to get Tanya," Stan cut in.

"No good," Charlie protested vigorously. "Once Soors get woman, she no good. No want to come."

"She's coming anyway," Stan answered grimly. "Show me where the big cave is, or I'll bust your neck!"

Charlie shook his head anxiously. The sharp glint in Stan's eyes suddenly caused him to change his mind. He slipped from the cave into the tunnel, followed by Stan.

THEY encountered no one along the twisted tunnels and soon came to familiar entrance of the big cavern. Stan shoved the native aside and crept forward cautiously. He still had the Seabold gun which the Soors had not taken upon capturing him.

Suddenly he stood up, abruptly, and entered the cavern. It was empty, save for a lone, crumpled figure lying on the throne. It was Tanya.

"My God!" Stan cried. A wave of fear shook him as he ran toward the girl. "They've killed her."

"She not dead," Charlie interrupted. "Dream-sleep. Soors do it to all women."

Stan lifted the limp body in his arms. The touch of her body, relaxed and yet firm, sent a new sensation coursing through his veins. He held her thus for a moment. Then his nerves tightened and he whirled toward the cave entrance.

"Soors!" Charlie yelled.

A squad of hideous bat-men plunged through the entrance, racing toward the dais amidst a savage bedlam of cries.

"Step on it," Stan snapped. He lifted the unconscious girl to his shoulder and leaped down the rear steps of the dais, plunging into the small tunnel behind the throne. The sound of Charlie's webbed feet flopping along and the angry cries of the bat-men in pursuit crashed in his ears.

The mysterious tunnel narrowed as it coiled through the mountain and soon the sound of pursuit diminished.

"They can't follow us through this," Stan muttered without slowing his pace. "But where the devil does it go?"

His question was soon answered by the appearance of a faint light in the distance. In another moment Stan carried the girl from the cavernous blackness into daylight—the daylight of Planetoid Ten's strange jungles.

"Jumping comets," said Stan. "We're right at the base of the mountain. We'd better push on before they decide to follow us."

"We all right," said Charlie. "Soors no come down in jungle. Wings too wide."

The native gathered a quantity of moist green herbs from the jungle undergrowth and squeezed some of their juice, forcing it between the girl's lips.

"What's that?" Stan questioned.

"Fix her," said Charlie.

The girl's lashes fluttered, warmth came to her cheeks, and she stared at the two men in a bewildered, frightened fashion.

"Where am I? Who—" she whispered hesitantly.

Stan squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"It's all right kid. I'm Stan. Remember?"

The girl smiled wanly.

"Where's my father?" she asked

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worriedly.

"You mean that you don't know where he is?" Stan gasped. "How the hell did you get here?"

"I came in my own ship," Tanya answered. "I was in Venus when my dad came back here the second time. He radioed me that he wanted supplies, guns. I'm afraid he's in trouble."

"What did he come back here for?"

The girl shrugged.

"You know dad. He's always been sort of a missionary at heart. He liked to do things for the uncivilized planet natives. That's why he came back here. He said there were some people he wanted to help."

"With guns?" Stan added doubtfully.

"I'm afraid," said Tanya.

"You ought to be! What the devil were you doing on that throne in the bat-men cave?"

The girl shivered involuntarily.

"I don't know," she said. "They brought me to the cave and one of them stung me with that awful stinger. After that I knew what was happening but I couldn't help myself. It was like being hypnotized."

"I don't like it," Stan cut in. "Those bat-men are going to come after you. They didn't put you up on that dais for nothing. We've got to find your father and get off this planetoid."

CHARLIE shook Stan excitedly. He pointed at the rapidly declining sun, then the overgrown jungle of plants and purplish ferns. A strange thing was happening. Tanya and Stan gaped in wide-eyed amazement.

The jungle withered before their very eyes. Life seemed to drain out of the giant ferns and they fell back into the mud-marshes, as if some vast force were causing them to decay. The fetid atmosphere also thinned, seeming to drain away. The transformation came with weird suddenness that caused a tingling sensation of awe to run through Leigh.

"It's colder now," Tanya cried.

Then Stan blinked, unbelievingly. *Charlie was gone!* A moment before the native had been at his side; now he was gone with the strange jungle verdure. He stared at the countless mud holes where a series of air bubbles formed upon the viscid surface.

Something moved there. Something dripping with slime crawled out toward them. Leigh's alert eyes caught the shape of platter hands—It was Charlie!

Dripping with ooze, the native stood on the mud-bank beckoning Stan and Tanya to dive into the flats. "Sleep, night," he called anxiously.

Stan shook his head.

"What the tarnation do you take me for?" he said. "Think I'm a mud turtle?"

A helpless frown crossed the native's none too expressive face. He took a step toward them, then back to the mud hole. He threw his platter hands overhead and dove into the mud.

Both Tanya and Stan stood gaping. Ripples spread across the sluggish surface. The hole where Charlie's body had disappeared slowly filled, leaving an occasional bubble rise to the surface.

"What a place to sleep," Stan gasped. "It's the next thing to hibernating for a night."

Tanya trembled and leaned closer to Stan.

"It gives me the creeps," she said. "Please, we must find my father."

"Buck up, kid," said Stan.

He led the girl along the tortuous route across the now barren, mud crusted terrain. Not far ahead, the dark outline of the hills that Charlie had pointed out earlier in the day, loomed.

When they came to a break in the

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hills, a narrow pass with sheer, porous stone bluffs that hung on each like bleak, foreboding curtains, Leigh found it difficult going. His breath came in jerky gasps. His lungs burned as if hot irons had been poked into them.

Then Tanya fainted. Leigh stared at her aghast. Her cheeks and lips were a sickly bluish color.

"Air!" he suddenly gasped. He staggered dizzily, his fingers reaching for the girl's space suit which was packed in a roll at her belt.

Somehow he got her into it. Then he fastened the helmet. A twist of the air inlet ballooned the space-suit.

His head whirled madly with the rush of violent blood. His space-helmet was tangled in his belt. He tore at it frantically while his lungs seemed to expand, to rip every tissue. Then everything went dark and nothing seemed to hurt anymore.

THE shroud of darkness that had enveloped his brain slowly slipped away, one curtain after another. Light and sensations returned by degrees. Then he saw Tanya standing over him, smiling thankfully.

"That was a close call," Tanya spoke through her portable transmitter. "I got your helmet on just in time. It was close for both of us."

"My Lord! What a planetoid!" Stan groaned. "The damn thing must be porous. The air drains into it at night. That's why Charlie went under."

"Look!" Tanya suddenly cried.

Stan's gaze swept in the direction of her pointing finger.

"A plantation house in this god-forsaken world," Stan gasped between breaths.

The strange house was a rambling affair constructed mostly of the planetoid's porous rock. The rear of the house leaned flush against the base of the cliff. Its roof—that was what caused Leigh to gasp again—was fashioned from the hull plates of Snow's dismantled space-ship.

"It's my father's. He's in there!" cried Tanya.

Stan held her back.

"Wait," he warned her. "It might be Snow's—and it might not!"

Stan loosened the gun in his belt and moved toward the house with cat-like strides. He kept well within the moon's shadow. There were no sounds from within, no movements, only the strange uncanny stillness of the planetoid's airless night.

Gripping his gun more tightly, Stan entered the house. Suddenly he turned to Tanya with a look of dismay.

"It's deserted!" he said. "It looks like he never lived here. The termites left a couple of chairs, that's all."

A harsh scraping from the rear of the house caused him to whirl around in time to see a steel door, fastened to the cliff-rock, slowly and mysteriously open. Beyond it there was a bare, rocky room—an air-lock—then another door.

"Looks like an invitation," Stan spoke suspiciously. "Think I'll take it up. How about you, Tanya?"

Tanya pressed closer to him as they stepped cautiously into the air-lock. Suddenly she let out a frightened cry. The outer door had closed behind them and a hissing of air followed.

"Lord Almighty!" Stan gasped as the second door swiftly rolled back.

The first objects to meet his startled gaze were a pile of cooking utensils and an electric stove. Tanya pushed past him excitedly.

"Dad!" she cried happily.

Egon Snow smiled upon his daughter tenderly. He was a big man whose shock of white hair and heavy white

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beard gave him a patriarchal bearing. Then he glanced toward Leigh, a look of recognition glowing in his steady eyes.

"You certainly picked yourself a nice summer home," Stan grinned, shaking hands.

"It will do," Snow answered with a nod toward the stone chairs within the cave. "Sit—I'll get you some food. We can talk after."

Stan welcomed the chance to shinny out of his space suit and sit at a well cooked meal. Snow, in the meantime, talked about Planetoid Ten with all the enthusiasm of a missionary-discoverer.

"The planetoid," he explained, "has an odd orbit. It's lopsided. During the day the surface is steaming hot and at night it's frigid; consequently the plant life runs through a complete four-seasonal cycle within the planetoid's day. Spring begins in the morning and winter comes at night."

THE aged Telanews explorer paused, waiting for an expression of surprise to meet his words.

"That's nothing," Stan cut in. "We just got away from the bat-men."

"The Soors—" There was an undertone of anxiety in Snow's voice, something he feared.

"Nice people, eh?" Stan smiled.

"There aren't many of them," said Snow. "A dying race. Somehow they only produce males among them and must make periodic raids on my Moku people for females. They're very dangerous. They have some semi-poisonous sting that enslaves the women."

Tanya gave a sudden gasp.

"Oh, it's not bad, my child," Snow reassured her. "You're safe here. We only have Mokus around the hills here. They're a very mild people, really friendly and intelligent. I'm working among them."

"Those mud puddlers!" Stan said sarcastically.

Snow gave him a hurt look.

"Oh, that," he replied. "Yes, the Mokus hibernated in the mud each night when I first discovered them. The air was down there—you see, they're semi-amphibian . . .

"But I've taught them to build cities in the cliffs. We'll have air-locks and compression pumps. Before long we'll have a self-sufficient civilization. Planetoid Ten is rich in tropical products and the Mokus learn quickly."

Tanya smiled at her father.

"You've always wanted to do this kind of work, haven't you, dad?"

Snow nodded.

"Yes, that's why I returned to Planetoid Ten after delivering my last set of pictures . . . the last I'll ever make."

"Yeah, but you're coming back to Telanews with me," said Leigh. "You've got to prove those pictures were true. And you've got to prove that you're not dead."

"Dead?" said Snow.

"Yeah, dead! That's what the world thinks."

"I wish I'd never taken those pictures," Snow complained.

"So does Old Man Harp. Spacefoto will ruin him," Stan answered drily. "They must have taken night pictures without thinking what might happen here during the day when they made that exposé."

"I've resigned from Telanews," said Snow.

Stan choked back his astonishment.

"Quitting?" he gasped.

Snow nodded seriously.

"The devil you will," Stan cried, leaping to his feet in agitation. "You're going back and prove those films were *bona fide*. There's a million dollar business on the verge of ruin unless you do."

"Let it be ruined," Snow answered

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stubbornly. "I'll not go back."

"That's what you think," said Stan. "But I'm taking you back personally, along with a few Mokus. You may be too damn mixed up in your missionary work to know it, but your life is in danger here. And Tanya, too! Those bat-men had a look at her. They're not going to give her up that easily."

Before the sound of his words had died in the cavern he felt a hand snatch the heat gun from his belt. His jaw sagged loosely, surprised, as he turned to face the muzzle of his own gun.

"Tanya! What the—"

The girl's eyes watched him coldly.

"My father doesn't want to return," she said evenly. "Sorry, but that's that."

Leigh looked at Snow. "You going to let her do that?" he snapped.

"I'm afraid so," Snow answered. "I'm sure you won't mind being a free prisoner on Planetoid Ten. I'll see that your ship is dismantled in the morning."

"*Dismantled!*" roared Stan. "Are you crazy?"

EGON Snow smiled wearily, meanwhile motioning Tanya to put down the heat gun.

"I wouldn't attempt to get away if I were you," Snow said with a nod to Leigh. "You can't anyway."

"Who'll stop me?" Stan growled.

"The Mokus—on my orders," said Snow. "But you don't understand . . ."

"Understand, hell!" Stan snapped. "Have you gone nuts enough to lock three of us on this lopsided planetoid for life? And what about Tanya? She is no girl to be lost up here. She belongs to the world."

Tanya straightened her shoulders proudly at Leigh's words.

"I'll do what Dad does," she said coldly.

"But Leigh, you *don't* understand," Snow persisted. "It is best that no one returns. It's best that the world has a false conception of Planetoid Ten. The moment they really discover the truth, this place will be overrun by space-tourists and colonial promotors. Remember Venus?"

"So what?" Stan frowned. "Venus has a fair set of taverns. In fact, it has a pretty good grade of brandy. What more do you want?"

Snow shuddered.

"I don't want that here," he said slowly. "The Mokus are a good-natured, simple people. I want them to live and develop a culture of their own."

"Sure," Leigh ridiculed. "Nice and sober. And the bat-men? I suppose you'll teach them Immelman's and wing-overs. You take my word for it. They're going to make trouble. They've seen Tanya and they'll be back for her."

"The Soors!" Snow shook his head. "They'll die off as long as we can keep the Moku females out of their hands. Tanya brought guns so we could protect ourselves."

"Hmm!" Stan dropped disgustedly upon one of the stone chairs. He knew the argument had come to a dead-end. Snow was right, absolutely right within certain limits. Yet, there was the fact that his company was at the mercy of the Spacefoto crowd . . . Snow just had to come back!

"What a story Snow's return would make," he thought. "The biggest in history."

Stan pictured himself sliding into the New York spaceport with Snow, Tanya and Charlie. Perhaps he'd have a floating jellyfish along, too. The news, of course, would have been shot ahead. Millions of people would be out there to welcome them. Then headlines, extra editions, Telanews, parades and—a

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raise . . .

The sound of the air-lock swinging open and a whiff of moist, hot air rushing into the cavern broke the train of wishful thoughts. One of the Moku natives entered, bearing a load of luxuriant fruit upon platter hands.

The native was followed by Charlie the Moku who bowed before Snow, then turned to Leigh, saying, "Me major-domo. Take you see works."

"Go along with him," Snow interrupted. "You're at liberty. Tanya will watch you until I've dismantled the two space-cruisers."

Stan nodded and followed the native from the cavern, through the plantation house to the open air. A sudden, desperate plan had formed in his mind. He hoped that Snow hadn't caught any betraying sign of it upon his face.

The plan was simple. Hadn't Tanya brought guns in her cruiser!

Leigh followed Charlie, feigning interest in the plantation—waiting.

OUTSIDE, the sun had come up, and along with it, the fetid jungle of strange plants and ferns. Leigh kept an alert watch on every movement, every change. Something told him that there was danger, not only in his plan, but danger lurking about, unsuspected danger.

His eye took note of the numerous Moku women working before the plantation, making mats and crude furniture. Many of them were no more than girls. They were tall and willowy, almost beautiful in their own way.

"Come see digging city," Charlie said with the pomp of a born guide.

Stan glanced into the crude vertical shaft, a preliminary tunnel leading to the future Moku underground city. Suddenly a shadow joined his.

It was Tanya. She was looking quite fresh and rested, having had a few hours sleep.

"How do you like your new home?" she chided him.

Stan shot her a disgusted glance.

"Not bad, except for the company," he answered.

"Meaning me?"

"Who else?" Stan replied drily.

"What's wrong with me?"

"Oh, you look all right," said Stan. "In fact, for a while I thought you were all right. I had a crazy idea we might get along pretty well together."

The girl blushed warmly.

"I don't see why we can't," she said. "We're friends. Does that sound strange?"

"Yeah, like another language," Stan answered with sarcasm.

"Stan," the girl went on, "I know it was hard to do what I did to you. It's hard for you to understand. Dad's always wanted something like this. I couldn't spoil it."

"Selfish, eh?" Stan grunted. "You couldn't stop to consider the people who'll lose their jobs when Telanews flops."

He turned away disgustedly.

"Wait, Stan!" Tanya cried, running to his side. "I have thought of them. And I've changed my mind. Here!"

She thrust the heat gun into his hand along with a tin of Telanews negatives. Stan stood stock still, gaping in astonishment.

"I've thought of those people," Tanya said hastily as if she were afraid she might change her mind. "Dad has gone to dismantle your ship. You still have time to stop him and return with your story. That tin contains more proofs which he failed to send back."

Stan fingered the gun, embarrassed. He shoved it into his belt, saying:

"All right. So you're seeing things my way. Come on; we're going. We'll take Charlie, you and your father."

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A look of dismay clouded the girl's pretty face.

"But Dad and I aren't going!" she cried.

"You're darn right you're going," Stan grinned. "I've got a job to do. Snow is going back to prove that he's alive and I'm not leaving you stay here with those bat-men on the loose."

"But there are pictures of Dad in the film."

"Nuts!" said Stan. "I want him in the flesh."

Tanya's lips quivered.

"You can't make us go," she cried, tears welling in her eyes.

"So sorry," said Stan. "I'm not making you go back—the heat gun is."

EGON SNOW and a score of Moku natives had just reached the space-cruisers when Stan Leigh, Tanya and Charlie the Moku came into view.

"Okay, Snow!" Stan shouted. "Drop your tools and get in. We're going to pay New York a visit."

Snow whirled, staring at Leigh and at the Seabold gun in his hand. His bearded jaw relaxed, amazed.

"Y-y-you can't do it, Leigh," he pleaded. "We don't want to go back. I tell you, we don't!"

"Get in," said Stan. "There are more people concerned in this than you."

"Tanya—" Snow began.

"Leave her out of it," snapped Stan.

Snow shrugged helplessly and climbed into the space-ship.

"All right, Tanya!" said Stan.

Abruptly, he sucked his breath in. Something sharp pressed into his back—a knife.

"Drop that gun," Tanya cried with a note of triumph in her voice.

"Why you little—"

The knife cut into his flesh dangerously. Leigh let the gun drop from his fingers and the girl caught it as it fell.

"Dad, you stay out here," Tanya ordered her father. "Stan, get in the compartment there," she added, indicating an empty storage chamber within the cruiser.

Stan controlled his anger and stepped in.

"What's the gag?" he demanded as the girl followed him and closed the door.

Tanya eyed him, her body tense and nervous. The ice around the edges of her voice melted as she spoke.

"Stan," she said. "I'm giving you a chance again. I know you've got a job to do. I know you're stubborn. But why don't you give it up and stay here with Dad and me?"

Stan leaned back against the steel compartment wall, a curious look glowing in his eyes.

"Don't you see what I'm offering you?" Tanya's voice became a soft whisper. "Don't you see that I'm offering you—"

Without a word, Stan swept her into his arms. He pressed all the fire in his lips against hers. For what seemed to be a fraction of eternity, her small body trembled against his. Then she pushed him away.

"You're staying,' she cried happily.

A troubled frown knitted Stan's brows. He shook his head slowly.

"No, kid. I've got to get back there," he glanced at the gun she still held. "I must get back, if you'll only put that toaster down.

She dropped the gun to the floor. Stan took it.

"Please, Stan."

For an instant he smiled at her, then he took her head in his hands, tenderly.

"I'm in love with you, Tanya," he spoke with feeling. "But I signed up for this job and I never go back on my word. Don't worry though. I'll go back alone. I'll straighten this thing

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up and get the Intergovernment Council to declare Planetoid Ten a zoned area so the commercial scavengers won't overrun it . . . Then I'll be back for you."

Their eyes met for a long moment. Stan felt his heart being torn apart, seeing the girl's lips tremble like that.

"I don't want you that way," she cried.

Then she ran from the compartment. Leigh leaped after her with an exclamation upon his lips, a mad desire to call her back, to say that he'd stay. But he stopped abruptly. He saw her outside, talking with her father and Charlie.

Presently Tanya turned, and without looking back upon the cruiser, ran toward the matted fern jungle.

"There goes love," Stan muttered grimly as he hesitated at the cruiser door before turning his back on the scene. "Maybe I'm the fool."

Suddenly a scream caused him to whirl around. At the same instant the air filled with the ominous sound of gigantic bat wings.

"My God!" Stan leaped from the cruiser.

Above, four weird bat-men wheeled clumsily over the cruiser, their hideous faces plainly visible. They swooped down in formation, wings outstretched, whistling shrilly, clawed hands reaching forward.

"Tanya, down!" Stan shouted hoarsely.

THE girl stood paralyzed, knowing not whether to run toward her father or Stan. Suddenly she turned toward Stan, her frightened eyes pleading.

Stan reached the girl's side just as the first Soor reached the bottom of its dizzy, diving curve. Stan felt the impact of collision—his head and the stubby feet of the monster. The beast let out an angry snarl.

Stan felt as if his head were rolling off through a heaven of blazing stars. It seemed to bang into a comet or two along the way.

"Stan! Stan!" Tanya screamed.

The bat-man swung overhead again and was already returning in a swift, devastating dive. The distance was too short for effective use of the heat gun. Stan grabbed a soft chunk of wood and rose to meet the Soor.

Swoosh! A gulf of wind swirled about his head. Leathery wings struck slashing blows. With all his might, Stan swung the club, shattering it against the bat-man's flank. The beast wobbled on the up-flight, then abruptly dropped to the earth out of the battle.

"Tie him up!" Stan shouted at Egon Snow.

"Stan—"

Leigh's blood suddenly chilled at the terrified cry from Tanya. Two ugly creatures were dragging her into the air. They had her aloft and out of reach before he could help her.

Meanwhile a fourth creature descended in a long spiral, diving for another assault. Stan measured the distance. For a moment he took his agonized eyes off of Tanya as a wild, desperate idea suddenly flashed into his mind.

He counted the seconds.

"Now, dammit," he bellowed as the flapping wings slapped at his head with terrific force. He leaped with the suddenness of unsprung steel.

His right hand clutched the bat-creature's blunt leg in a desperate grip. For a second there was a wild thrashing of wings as the snarling Soor dragged its human burden across the rough ground. Then, with a tremendous upsurge, both Stan and the beast shot into the air.

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The bat creature struggled helplessly, trying to dislodge the iron fisted human being clinging to its leg. At the same time it fought for more altitude.

Stan caught a glimpse of the ground reeling fifty feet below. He heard Snow shouting some unintelligible warning. He shuddered and hung on tighter. The fingers of his free hand twisted in the matted hair higher upon the body of the bat-man and with almost superhuman strength, Stan pulled himself into position, getting both arms around the creature's middle.

"Now, sweet chariot, make tracks," he hissed.

Both arms squeezed and the beast let out an agonized snarl that brought a grim smile to Leigh's lips. The plan was working! The bat-man, frightened by the burden upon its back, headed off toward the volcanic mountain where Tanya had been carried.

Beads of sweat stood out on Stan's brow as the beast made for the volcano mouth and dropped into the dark interior . . . sixty feet . . . forty . . . thirty . . . twenty feet . . . The ledge appeared. Stan relaxed his grip slightly. Then both man and beast crashed heavily.

Stan leaped aside quickly, covering the Soor with his heat gun. He squeezed the trigger.

"That ends your flying days," he growled.

Then turning to the entrance of the tunnel that led to the weird underground caverns, Stan did a strange thing. After entering the tunnel, he carefully aimed the Seabold gun at the side wall of the entrance. Sharp daggers of flame bored into the porous rock until the stone began crumbling. With a grinding roar, rock piled into the tunnel, sealing the entrance behind Stan.

"First time I ever burned a bridge after me," he muttered grimly as he set out along the slanting, eldritch lit maze of subterranean passages.

Again his flesh tingled with an eerie sensation, a feeling of clammy oppression, of hidden menace. The greenish glow within the tunnels caused strange shapes to suddenly dance across the walls.

Presently he found the cave where he had been held captive. A moment later he crept toward the large cavern. There his heart jumped a beat at the sounds that clashed upon his ears—savage, inhuman, lustful cries issuing from the monstrous throats of the Soors gathered in the great cavern.

Stan's eyes flashed upon the milling mob of bat-creatures in horror. A blind rage shook his body at the sight of the ugly bat-man who had seized the girl in his brutal, pulsating arms.

They were fighting over her!

HORRIBLE snarls echoed in the cavern. Clawed hands snatched at the petrified girl and the bat-man who held her. The bat-man held his prize and bared his jagged teeth at the others. The circle closed in, then Stan went into action . . .

"You lugheads!" he roared.

Soors on the outer fringe of the mob turned at the sound of his voice. The disturbance registered upon those farther in. No growl of savage warning ever sounded more hair-raising than the chilling cry emitted by the bat-men as they recognized Stan.

Three Soors lunged at him, wings flapping angrily, faces contorted into bestial snarls. Stan waited, let them converge on him, then he let go with the full blast of the Seabold gun. The stench of burning flesh mingled with the acrid yellow smoke and horrible shrieks of mutilated beasts.

The uproar that followed turned into a savage dogfight. Soors tore at each

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other, fought for the girl, charged at Stan.

"Get out of my way," Stan roared as he blasted his way through the milling sea of angrily beating wings, grasping arms and struggling bodies. The heat gun turned the cavern into a sudden hell, mowing the Soors down in waves.

Suddenly Stan turned the gun in his hand, swinging the butt-end, crashing it into skulls, making a savage, hard-fought trail to the center of the cavern. His fist crashed into a Soor who lunged at him. Again the gun cracked a skull to bloody pulp.

The intense orange flame from the heat gun and the violent onslaught of the strange man were too much for the bat-men. Taken by surprise, they fought among themselves to get out of the deadly range of the gun.

Stan shook the hair out of his eyes and bore down on the bat-man who held Tanya. The beast turned with a furious snarl, jabbing its mind-paralyzing stinger at Stan.

Stan ducked aside and with a swift movement closed in, smashing the butt of his gun in the Soor's face. The beast recoiled an instant, then leaped forward with a savage growl. Smash! Stan's fist plowed into the *thing's* stomach. The bat-man choked for breath. Stan brought the butt of his gun down heavily and there was the sound of cracking skull bones.

"Tanya!" Stan yelled. He leaped over the dead bat-man, swept the girl up in his arms and raced toward the tunnel behind the throne. A host of savage cries followed him.

"Wait a minute," said Stan as he reached the tunnel. "Go up ahead, Tanya, I've a job to finish here."

He backed into the tunnel, covering pursuit with his Seabold gun. When he had cleared the entrance he turned the blast of his gun on the side walls.

"Here goes," he shouted triumphantly.

The sound of his voice was swallowed up. The tunnel flared with an orange light and heat as the rocky ceiling ripped open and crashed down with a ear-splitting roar that was like a vengeful mountain slide. Dust ballooned through the narrow dark way, shrouding everything with its choking thickness.

On the far side of the cave-in, within the great cavern, countless Soors gaped, knowing instinctively that death had come. Dozens of them fled in panic only to find that both entrances of their subterranean world were sealed. Instinctively their simian brains gave way to fear, animal fear of death in a trap.

Meanwhile Stan and Tanya ran through the last few hundred feet of the tunnel. Their clothes had been torn, their faces bruised and their bodies covered with dust by the thunderous cave-in.

As they came into the open air, Stan grinned at the girl.

"Well, we made it so the Mokus won't ever be bothered again," he said with an air of triumph.

"So we won't ever be bothered," said Tanya. "I knew you'd do it, Stan. I knew you'd change your mind and stay."

A troubled look crossed Stan's face. He took the girl in his arms, saying:

"Listen, kid. I would have died for you if I had had to. I mean it. But I still have a contract to fill. I'm going, but I want you to take me when I come back."

"Stan—" Tanya's eyes pleaded.

STAN LEIGH tossed an uninterested glance at the shapely legs of the blond secretary in the outer office of the Telanews Corporation and pushed his way into William Harp's office.

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Harp glanced up, more owlish than ever when the door slammed.

"Well, Gees, Leigh old boy," he growled jovially. "What can I do for you? Give you a job?"

Stan halted, amazed. Why wasn't Harp jumping all over him, pumping him for news of Snow. Quickly he gained control of himself.

"I'm giving you a job," he answered drily. "I found Snow—alive!"

"You what?" Harp gasped. His fat face suddenly turned pale.

"Have a bicarbonate," Stan grinned. "The blasted old Telanews Corporation is saved. And who did it? You're little white haired boy, Stan Leigh."

"That's impossible!" Harp muttered.

"Nothing is impossible," said Stan. "We've got the Spacefoto crowd in a corner. Tomorrow we get enough pictures out to blast them off the screen. Egon Snow's pictures were *bona fide*. I saw the stuff. In fact, I've got new pictures of Snow—and something better than pictures."

Stan beamed upon his boss. He was filled with the excitement of the occasion. This was a story. The biggest story in history.

"A-a-are you s-s-ure?" Harp stuttered weakly.

Stan smiled triumphantly.

"Sure! Why man, I've got one of those flying bat-men from Planetoid Ten cooped up in my space-cruiser. We captured it alive. Lord, man! We'll put in on exhibit. What more do you want?"

Suddenly, to Leigh's complete astonishment, his boss keeled over, out of his chair in a dead faint.

"Here, swallow deep," Stan forced a glass of brandy down the fat man's throat.

Harp blinked his eyes and choked spasmodically.

"You can't bring that stuff back here," he ranted after a moment. "I don't want any proof. Go tell Snow that he's got to stay dead. I'll pay him well."

Stan stared at the tubby little man in alarm.

"What do you mean?" he gasped. "Stay dead?"

"Just that," Harp answered. "Take Snow away. He must remain dead. No one must ever see him again."

"Calm yourself," Stan said, patting his boss soothingly. "I realize it was tough for you, hanging on here with all the trouble Telanews was in. But don't let it get you down. We've got the stuff now. The company is saved."

Harp grabbed the tin of films Stan had put on his desk. He ripped the lid away and shook the films out into his wastebasket.

"Hey! Are you nuts?" Stan roared.

Abruptly, Harp touched a cigar lighter to the negatives.

"Cut that!" Stan cried. He twisted the fat man's arm in an iron grip. "What the hell has happened to you? Those films are worth a million bucks."

Harp pushed him away and calmed down somewhat. "Listen, Leigh," he said. "I'm going to shock you. Maybe Snow's pictures are *bona fide*. Maybe there are jungles on Planetoid Ten and Snow is alive there. Maybe you did bring back a flying man. . . . Now listen, you've got to put that thing back where you got it. And we've got to destroy all the proof."

LEIGH'S jaw sagged. The muscles crumbled out of his legs and he swayed dizzily. He felt as if the world had been knocked from under him. He shook his head to make sure he was hearing right.

"After you left for the planetoid," Harp continued, "Spacefoto forced us to merge with them. It's one big com-

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pany now. In the meantime, Telanews issued a public apology admitting that our pictures of Planetoid Ten were a hoax made in our own studios. We also issued a statement that Snow had died before the pictures were made. He had died doing some missionary work. The public likes that. So you see, we must let the public forget all about Planetoid Ten."

Leigh suddenly grabbed the little man by the collar, shaking him like a sack of wheat.

"What are you doing?" he snapped. "Framing the public?"

Harp gulped with difficulty. He shook with fright beneath Stan's angry glare. "No, we're not framing," he mumbled. "We thought it best not to cause a controversy . . . You need not take it so hard, Leigh. I'll get you a good job with the new company and we'll make Snow perfectly comfortable as long as he doesn't attempt to return to Earth."

"Thanks," Stan snapped sarcastically. "Here's what I think of your job!"

He seized the pudgy man's face in his hand, giving it a hefty shove backward. Harp shrieked, tripped over his swivel chair and crashed into the wall.

"Leigh—" he pleaded. "You're not going to expose this thing yourself, are you?"

"What about that contract?" said Stan.

"I'll make it good. How about a hundred thousand dollars?" Harp pleaded. He opened his check book and began writing.

"That's chicken feed," Stan said ironically.

"A quarter of a million?"

Stan shrugged.

"You won't expose this thing then?" Harp looked up worriedly.

Stan Leigh speared the disheveled figure of his boss with a look of contempt as he took the check and stuffed it in his pocket.

"That's your worry," he grinned. "Right now I'm off to buy supplies for Old Man Snow and maybe a ring. Then I'm heading back for Planetoid Ten and if I ever catch one of your cameramen scouting around there, I'll break his head open. Tanya and I don't want company."

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RIDDLES OF SCIENCE

The Mystery of Exploding Stars

AT THE PRESENT TIME **NOVAE** ARE THE OBJECTS OF INTENSE STUDY BY **ASTRONOMERS**, WHO CONSIDER THEM ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT **MYSTERY-PHENOMENA** OF THE UNIVERSE,

FROM SOME MYSTERIOUS CAUSE, **STARS** SUDDENLY BECOME VERY BRILLIANT, AND **INCREASE** MANY TIMES IN MAGNITUDE, FOR JUST A FEW DAYS, THEN DIE AWAY AGAIN. **SCIENCE** IS INTENSELY **INTERESTED** IN WHY THIS HAPPENS . .

THE BRILLIANT **MYSTERY** STAR THAT LED THE **MAGI** TO THE **CHRIST-CHILD** MAY HAVE BEEN A **NOVA** .

ASTRONOMERS ARE INTERESTED IN **NOVA** BECAUSE WHAT CAN HAPPEN TO ONE STAR CAN HAPPEN TO ANOTHER OUR OWN **SUN** IS A **STAR** . IT MIGHT EASILY BECOME A **NOVA** AND **DESTROY** ITS CHILDREN, THE **PLANETS**

ASTRONOMERS during recent years have been searching the heavens for novae, charting and making observations on each one detected, in an effort to solve the mystery of their appearance, and the cause that lies back of this mysterious brightening or exploding of stars. Their reasons are not merely curiosity, but a conviction that herein may lie the answer to the problem of atomic power, the nature of matter, and of energy. Amateur astronomers have been enlisted in this important research.

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Never Lived

by Ross Rocklynne

How could Blake Harrison remember a life he had never lived? Worse yet, how could he be two men, one of them under sentence of death for piracy?

BLAKE HARRISON, unshaved, clad in dirty flannels and open shirt, lounged at a corner table of the Red Café, the most ill-reputed saloon in Marsport, clutching a glass of Martian ale in his big hand.

His eyes, half closed from days of carousing, watched a chorus of dancers cavorting in the middle of the floor, and the bawdy space-hands who applauded their act.

Two men, clad in the uniform of the Martian port police, pushed their way through the cigarette smoke toward Blake Harrison. They stood over him, ominously. He looked up, startled.

"You, Blake Harrison!" one said curtly. "You're under arrest!"

Before Harrison could resist, a pair of steel handcuffs snapped over his wrists.

"Say, what is this?" Harrison raged, throwing himself to his feet and wrestling wildly with the cuffs.

The calm-faced officer pulled a Graydon flame pistol out from his waist.

"March!" he said. He laughed jeeringly. "So the famous, so-wily Blake Harrison allows himself to get caught

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in a cheap dive! I could have thought better of you. I didn't think you were common scum!"

Harrison took one look at the pistol, another one at the evil laughing faces of the space-hands who had gathered around in an interested circle.

His hands fell limply in front of him. His jaw, which had seemed slackened by drink before, now suddenly hardened, and grim sparks shot out of his eyes.

"I don't get it," he said, in a flat, steely voice, meeting the eyes of the officer burningly. "But I'll march—and so will you, stuffed shirt, right out of your stripes, when my family back on Earth hears about this!"

The officer laughed gently, in great humor.

"Family! Everyone knows Blake Harrison's family died five years after he was born, in a space-wreck, and that he was rescued by pirates; which accounts for his arrest now, in case he doesn't know it!" His voice turned ugly. "C'mon, you—*move!*"

Blake Harrison moved, without another word. His sudden rage had turned into a curious, tight-lipped wonder. He truly didn't know what this was all about. What did these officers mean by saying that his family had died in a space-wreck; that he himself had been rescued by pirates?

No such thing! Something was very wrong, somewhere! But, knowing the port police of Marsport, the domed city which harbored all incoming liners on the planet Mars, the best, by *far* the best thing, was not to raise any rumpus!

AT the other end of the domed city, Blake Harrison faced a granite-featured chief of police, who tapped gently on his broad-topped desk as he studied his prisoner.

"You admit you're Blake Harrison," he said tonelessly, "but refuse to admit that you're the *pirate* Blake Harrison?"

"You're damned right I refuse to admit it," Harrison snarled. "You tin-horn police think you can go around arresting people just because their names happen to be the same! I'm telling you, the minute the cuffs fall away, there's going to be a hell of a lot of tin badges falling on the floor as you guys resign!

"I'll say I'm Blake Harrison—of the steel mill Harrisons! I hope," he said ominously, "that means something to you!"

He grinned triumphantly.

The granite-faced man smiled thinly, and glanced significantly at the two officers who had brought Harrison in. Then he motioned to his secretary, sitting with pencil poised over her shorthand notebook.

"Get me the *dossier* on Blake Harrison, and call in the identity expert with the mouth plates of Blake Harrison."

The secretary handed him the *dossier* after a few minutes, then spoke into a phone across the room.

The chief of police of Marsport flicked open the *dossier*.

"Blake Harrison," he read. "Age 28, orphaned at the age of five, sheltered by a band of pirates on Asteroid X until he was 21, when he took over the leadership with a series of killings. Since then, with his band has raided merchant vessels, kidnaped passengers from passenger ships, sacked unprotected villages on the frontier planets, killing, robbing, torturing as he went."

The chief ran his eyes down a list that evidently consisted of Blake Harrison's crimes. He finished up:

"Description. Six feet, black eyes, black hair, black beard; addicted to brown colors in clothing; smokes cigarettes or pipe; root stain on lower right eyetooth; full lips; tanned."

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He went on with other items, then raised calm, quizzical eyes at the prisoner.

"That fits Blake Harrison the pirate, and it fits Blake Harrison, the so-called steel millions' son."

Harrison stared at him with popping eyes. He felt as if his reason was tottering. A cloud was rushing up through his brain.

He took one step forward, his lips working.

"But I don't get it," he whispered, half extending his hands. "I know that description fits me, but I swear I'm—"

The chief suddenly leaned forward, his eyes abruptly hard and frosty.

"Shut up!" he clipped out. "Damn you and your silly act! We've got you! Take it like a man. Oh—come in, Bert."

The identity expert came in. The chief of police motioned to him. The identity expert went up to Blake Harrison and, much as one would a horse, to inspect its age, he pried open Harrison's mouth skilfully, inserted a plate filled with a thick, gummy substance against the roof of that mouth, holding it there firmly. Then he eased it out carefully.

"It's him," the expert said disinterestedly as he started for the door. "Them mouth plates don't lie. There aren't two men in the world with the same roof of the mouth."

BLAKE HARRISON stared after him agape, his head whirling. A frightful feeling of madness was creeping in on him. In spite of himself, he began to shake.

He went up to the desk and brought his cuffed hands down once, with a thump.

"It's a frame-up," he whispered. "I swear it is! I've been on Mars for two weeks. I came in on the *S.S. Lakington.* You can check the passenger lists. Before that, I lived in Akron, Ohio. Before that, I went to Yale. I played football in the class of '80. I—"

He stopped as he saw the chief speak into the telephone.

"Lakesley? Look on the passenger list for *S.S. Lakington,* incoming. Blake Harrison listed there? Hell, no? You'd have noticed it— Sure—sure— No, we've got him here—he's cooking up a wild story— Thanks—thanks. Right—a load off our minds."

The chief hung up and leaned forward, his eyes steely.

He said ruminatively, "It's been a long time that we've been trying to get you, Harrison. At last we've succeeded. And by God, there won't be a woman or child who won't cry for joy when they hear about it. Two months from now, when you finally get back to Earth and trial, you'll find out what people think about you!"

He made a motion. "Put him in a cell—deportation in two weeks!"

And Blake Harrison was hauled away, his face dull, his eyes haunted with the fear of his own madness. He had *never heard* of Blake Harrison, the pirate! And if all the women and children on Earth had, why hadn't he? *Why hadn't he?*

HARRISON was in his cell two days before he decided on his escape. He had never thought of himself as a particularly daring person, but now he felt he would do anything rather than stay here for another twelve days, going mad with his thoughts.

He had begged and pleaded for the guard to send a message to the warden to come and see him, to allow him to explain. The guard hadn't replied. Now he was beginning to suspect that he must be the victim of a gigantic, in-

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credible frame-up! He *couldn't* be Blake Harrison, the pirate! Or—the very thought sent shivers up his spine and sent him shuddering toward madness—*was he?*

All that burden of proof! The mouth plate. The *dossier*. Even down to the color he preferred in his clothing! No one could doubt that the chief of police *knew* he was a pirate they had been searching for.

Once he had called across to one of the nondescript occupants of a cell opposite him, asking about Harrison, the pirate—if there was such a person.

The man burst into a loud guffaw. "Sure, buddy," he roared. "You're *him!* The dirtiest, orneriest stinker that ever lived, you rat! Congratulations to the world that they caught you! At least, *I* never went around murdering people in bed!" He spat and turned away.

Blake Harrison recoiled from that indictment, an indictment of him for something dreadful that was going on that he couldn't name! Whatever it was, some fiendish plot had taken place. The police were certain this was the feared pirate. Even his cellmates were! So Harrison decided he couldn't stay here any longer. If he did, he'd go mad—and think he *was* the pirate, too.

HIS cell had one window, at shoulder height. During the day, the air-conditioning apparatus that Marsport boasted blew the air out the window. At night, for three hours, the air blew strongly through the window, circulating through the jail, which was a plain affair, after all, not particularly designed to hold escaping prisoners. If they did escape, they'd never be able to leave the doomed city of Marsport anyway.

Harrison studied his chances. He could look through the window with the thick bars lacing it, and see the lights of the city now. This was the rear of the jail, flanked first by a strip of land that had once started out to be a garden, but was now a weed-grown wilderness; and flanked beyond that by a noisome alley that led into main avenues.

But Blake Harrison was not interested in the alley. He was more interested in the masses of poison ivy vines on the side of the building.

In the darkness of his cell, every time the guard passed, he hoisted himself up to the broad window sill, scraped great quantities of the vines off the sides of the building, until he had made a great patch. He pulled them in, stuffed them under his bunk, a huge mess of them.

Constantly, he let himself down again as the guard came past, and then hoisted himself up again to draw in more. Finally he couldn't get any more of the vines. He called it a day, and went to bed, though troubled with fear that his plan was too slim, too fantastic to allow him success.

Harrison kept the vines hidden during the next two days by dropping the counterpane over the bed and almost to the floor. At the end of those two days, the vines had dried out sufficiently to burn, though they were just green enough to cause great quantities of smoke.

And when that smoke, from the burning of a vine that had been carelessly transplanted from Earth to Mars, began to circulate through the jail—yes, even through the outer rooms, through the ventilating system, under the impulse of the Marsport night breeze—hell should pop—and there would be a lot of uncomfortable people within the space of a few minutes.

For this was *Martian poison ivy!*

"One thing in the world that is harder

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than anything else *not* to do," Harrison told himself fervently. *"To scratch!* And there's going to be a lot of scratching people!"

Harrison's plans after he should escape seemed hopeless. But escape he must, if only to show his resentment at the way he was being treated. Too, there was a feeling deep in his mind that once he was free in Marsport, he could elude the police for a time long enough to enable him to establish his true identity.

He didn't let himself think what would happen if even his radiograms to his mother and father didn't bring strong denials that he was any such thing as a pirate. What if, indeed, his radiograms were returned to the Marsport station because *no such persons as his mother and father existed?*

He stopped himself there, and devoted himself stubbornly to his desperate plan. He would go mad if he thought any more along those lines.

The jail quieted down as the sun ceased to send its red infiltration of light through the curving dome of the great Martian city. The faint city lights came on.

KEEPING his nerves from quaking the way they seemed likely to at any moment, Blake Harrison accepted his last cigarette of the day from the guard, held it to his mouth while the guard lighted it and then walked on.

He took one deeply appreciated puff on the cigarette, and then husbanded the slow glow jealously. He had to keep that glow until the strong night breeze began. Even if he had to transfer that glow to something else and risk detection.

"Now!" he said to himself. The breeze started coming fitfully through the window, and then more steadily as the huge fans below the city settled down to their job. The wind became strong, sighing through the cell, through the jail, through the warden's office, the guard room, through the outer reception hall where prisoners were registered before being taken in for a looking-over.

Feverishly, Harrison dragged his vines out from under the bed, placed them in the middle of the floor, as the guard passed on his slow up and down journey.

He plucked a dead leaf from the vines, powdered it in his hand, took others, and made a little pile.

Quaking, he leaned far down, blew sparks from the cigarette onto the pile of tinder. The tinder smoldered. Under his coaxing, anxious breath, it suddenly leaped into flame! With a hissing of released breath, Blake Harrison shoved it under the heap, watched other dead leaves take hold, soon saw flame leaping through the whole base of the pile. A preliminary cloud of smoke billowed away—through the cell door.

"Good old poison ivy!" Blake Harrison whispered lovingly. "Ten times as virulent now as the kind they accidentally imported from Earth a century ago!"

Oddly enough, the idea occurred to him only fleetingly that he himself was subject to this ivy; in fact, more susceptible because he was directly in its path. But something in the dim recesses of his mind told him that somehow, he would be immune.

More smoke rose, billowed away, the clouds growing in volume as the half-green stuff swiftly smoldered.

In a few minutes, a veritable river of acrid smoke was pouring out from the cell, billowing away in great clouds up the corridor, streaming through ventilator gratings.

The guard was bound to come any minute now. Harrison waited, tensed.

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Soon came the pounding of big feet. Blake Harrison heard the guard choking. But he got to the cell door, peering in through blinking, wet eyes.

"What's going on in there?" he roared. Receiving no answer from Harrison he burst into a stream of choking curses. Keys rattled, a lock turned. The door swung open.

Still choking, the guard entered. Harrison, hidden partly by the smoke, leaped. It was all over in a moment. The guard barely offered the resistance of a startled, upflung arm before Harrison bore him hard to the flooring, to strike his head hard against the cement. The guard moaned and was still. Harrison still made no move to escape. The guard's clothing would not fit him even if he wanted to try that method.

He waited, crouched.

The other prisoners were now waking up, and calling back and forth to each other. Suddenly they realized the smoke was coming from Harrison's cell, and were generously silent, realizing that some strange plan of escape was being consummated.

TEN minutes passed. Still the vines continued to smolder, though the great volume of smoke was dying down now. Blake Harrison chuckled exultantly. The smoke had been discovered in the outer rooms, but they wouldn't know where it was coming from. They must have been choking so much too, that there had been confusion; *and* scratching!

When the poison ivy smoke showed signs of decreasing toward a minimum, Harrison decided he had better get out of there.

He left his cell, ran swiftly down the corridor toward a turn in the hallway that gave way into the guard room.

He came into the brilliantly lighted guard room, partly clouded by the smoke. A guard, holding his handkerchief over his mouth with one hand, and scratching madly at his legs with the other, rushed in, evidently bound for the cells, and saw him. His eyes bulged.

Plainly, in that split second that counted so much, the man was divided between an insane desire to scratch and a need to jerk out his pistol. He took one last agonizing scratch—and by that time, Blake Harrison was on him, had knocked him down, had struck him; and then was on his way.

He made the warden's clouded office, saw it was empty. He went on to the outer hall. Here he saw the warden, and three guards, all using both hands trying to scratch their entire bodies at the same time.

The warden saw Harrison, took one look, scratched agonizingly and then yelled at the guards,

"Get him! That's Harrison!"

One of the guards panted, "I can't! The *hell* with it! I *itch!*"

Blake Harrison went through, his one hundred and eighty pounds bowling them over. Without another soul to stop him, he hurled open the tall double doors, bounded the granite stairs three at a time, and was in the street. In another five seconds, he had rounded a corner, and was panting at the cruising driver of a two-wheeled, gyroscopic-balanced, atom-powered taxi,

"Paddock Hotel, corner of Madison and Sunset! Quick!"

The driver burned up the streets, in ten minutes had let Harrison out.

"Wait here," said Harrison. He dashed away. He didn't have any money with him, but knew he had some in his room.

He stopped at the registration desk, holding out one imperative hand.

"Let me have my key!" he said.

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The supercilious clerk looked his unkempt figure up and down distastefully.

"Name?"

Blake Harrison knew a moment of shock as he realized that he had registered here under another name. *Why?* He gave the name, Ray Lanning; and received a shock that sent him rocking back on his heels.

The clerk ran his eyes down the list of names. He looked up with a scowl.

"There's no Ray Lanning registered here," he snapped. He made a motion with his thumb. "Get out, bum, before I sic the house man on you! *Move!*"

LIGHTS flickered in front of Harrison's eyes. With a savage motion, he turned the registration book around, reading wildly. He couldn't find his name, even though he remembered signing two weeks before!

The clerk suddenly made a motion to a man with a low-brimmed hat. The man with the low-brimmed hat started across the room toward Blake Harrison. Harrison caught sight of him out of the corner of his burning eyes. He turned quickly, ran across the soft-carpeted lounge, past the elevators. He flung open a door, and found himself in an alleyway.

He ran up the alley, turned down another one, and up another, until he felt sure no one had followed him. Then he huddled against a dark wall, and buried his burning face in his hands, little uncontrollable sobs coming from his stomach.

Who was he?

He *knew* that he had come in on the S.S. *Lakington,* from Earth, two weeks before. He *knew* he had registered at the Paddock Hotel, at the same time. He *knew* that before that he had lived his whole life on Earth. He could recount his whole history there.

Yet—*the mouth plates had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was Blake Harrison, a pirate the whole solar system feared!*

Finally he raised his head, staring unseeingly toward the main avenue where milled the night traffic of Marsport, automobiles with two wheels, pedestrians leaving shows or cafés.

What was he to do now? If he was caught by the police again, he'd never escape conviction as a notorious pirate.

His mind began to work with thoughts he had dared not contemplate before. All these events had begun in the café where he had been arrested. As far as actual facts seemed to go now, *he must have been born shortly before those events took place!*

He took a deep breath, and moved on shuddering legs down poorly lit alleys, making his way back toward that café. Somehow, he must find the solution there.

The café was in the down-at-heel section of the town, where the air circulated more poorly than in other parts, because here was where the Martian dome came down to meet the ground. He hovered across the street, listening to the bawdy music, the roars of men, watching painted women and drunken men entering or leaving.

Suddenly, Harrison saw something that sent the breath soughing from his lungs. From a pair of basement steps a few doors removed from the café, a man with a hat pulled low over his eyes emerged. There was something about that figure that was monstrously familiar.

And not only that, the man was dressed in a shabby suit of *brown!*

Blake Harrison's hands crept up to his cheeks. His very skin was shuddering under the horror that was entering his mind.

For that man, who now moved down

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the street, head bent low, was—could be—*none other than himself!*

Blake Harrison almost collapsed onto the rude cobblestones as the certainty of that came to him. The two of them were undeniably—*identical!*

But how? *How?*

HARRISON wasted no more time in mad thoughts. He impelled himself across the street, fighting down his dizziness. He had one moment of sanity before he descended the basement stairs. He stooped in the street, and with his heel chipped off a corner of the curb. It was made of a substance that would serve the purpose of chalk admirably.

On the smooth red wall above the stairs he wrote four words, scrawling them boldly. He checked them over, feeling an impulse to laugh but unable to do so. Let any policeman read those words and he'd come running. But nobody else would pay any attention to them at all.

At the bottom of the cement stairs, he opened the door without hesitation, closed it quickly behind him.

The room was dark, except for an infiltration of light from a clouded window. As his eyes focused, he saw a rude bed, a washstand, a table, chairs, nothing else—except a door.

On cat feet, he approached that door, listening, fighting down his quick, hoarse breath. He put his hand to the knob, opened the door. The room was empty of life, though the light was on. It was a startling contrast to the first room, for strangely constructed machinery—weird and unearthly even to Harrison's unmechanical mind—practically filled the room.

He stood like a statue. A flash of memory, that passed as quickly as it came, sent a wave of goose flesh to his skin. He had, in the split second before it eluded him, remembered being in this room before. How long before? He had no thought in his mind that would tell him. He searched frantically. He found one scrap of information that peculiarly revolted him, one sudden memory.

The first thing that had ever happened to him had happened in this room! So the ephemeral thought told him.

"Crazy!" Harrison gasped. "Crazy!" The cold, thick sweat was running down his face.

He closed the door behind him, running his eyes around the machinery: a coffin-like contrivance, with ball electrodes projecting from either end; a large funnel with a spray of peculiarly wound coils sprouting from it; a pedestal holding on knife edges something that looked like a replica of a human brain, only it had none of the ridges.

What revolting thing had happened to Blake Harrison in this room, so revolting and horrible that his mind would not let him recall it?

His brain tottering, his nerves strained to the breaking point, he suddenly turned with a moan and flung open the door, pulling it tight after him. He held on to the knob as if afraid something were in there that would get him.

Then, realizing he was being irrational, he sank panting to a chair, burying his face in his hands, his thoughts whirling madly in his head . . .

He heard a click. Something of the tenseness of his nerves must have made him supernormal in his muscular reactions. He sprang to his feet with a snarl and hurled himself toward the man who stood in the door, mouth agape.

The man recoiled.

"You!" he screamed, as he saw Blake Harrison charging toward him.

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The packages he was carrying dropped with a clatter. He flung up his arms, warded off Harrison's first furious, murderous blow. Harrison was flung to one side and spun hard against the wall, his breath soughing from his lungs.

HE saw the other man—a man the exact duplicate of *himself*—coming toward him, lips curled back from even white teeth, black, evil eyes blazing with a satanic impulse. Something hit Harrison crushingly. He raised both arms, kicked with one foot, caught his opponent on the chest. The man staggered backward, crashed into the table. The table tottered, then the satanic eyes were coming at Harrison again. This time Harrison could meet him with the full power of his fists.

He plowed in, his mind working with a hate that was purely animal, could not even be accounted for.

He caught a blow on the side of the head, retaliated with a fist that rose up from his hips at express train speed. In the last split second, that murdering blow was deflected.

A huge fist started toward his own head.

"I'll kill you!" the man with the satanic eyes whispered. "Yes, I will! *I created you—now I'll kill you!*"

It was as if all the lights had been turned out. Blackness engulfed Blake Harrison's brain in a great enveloping cloud. He tottered, reeled, then seemed to float down for an interminable length of time. Then, light as a feather, he seemed to strike the floor. Just as slowly, he drifted off to a sleep that was profound in its sheer lack of consciousness . . .

Thoughts again began to stir in his sluggish mind, began to react on his muscles.

His eyes opened; a moan, feeble and faraway, was ejected from his parted, bleeding lips.

He was still in the same room, staring through the shadowy darkness of it at a man—at *himself!*—a man who sat on the other side of the room, leaning slightly forward, a Graydon flame pistol balanced on his knee. Harrison himself was bound to a chair.

Their eyes, alike in every way save for the sheer evil that burned in the other's, locked.

"You fool!" the other Blake Harrison whispered, his nostrils flaring. "How did you break jail?"

Harrison's lips moved as if he were in a trance.

"It doesn't matter," he muttered throatily, his eyes staring with a horrible fascination at his double. *"I want to know about myself!"*

"About *you!* Know this, then. In a few minutes, you die. And it will not matter, because according to all the natural laws, *you never lived!*"

"I don't care about that," Harrison whispered, still throatily. "If I'm what I think I am, I won't want to live . . . But I can't be what I think I am," he cried suddenly, agonized. "I've got friends at home, a mother, a father, a brother; I've got a childhood, a boyhood, a manhood that I remember, down to small details!

"But," he protested, seeming to shrink within himself, "you did all that, too! You did everything. You made me. You—"

THE other Blake Harrison smiled sadistically.

"I have," he said through barely moving lips, "a peculiar loathing against letting myself—*you*—die without telling you some small part of what really happened. Could you listen without going mad?"

"Yes," Harrison said dully.

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"I am the pirate, Blake Harrison, and all the things you've heard about me are true." The double smiled again. "I came to Marsport, believing that I had established in the minds of the interplanetary police the belief that I was on Earth. That they would think to suspect my being in Marsport seemed out of the question.

"Someone recognized me in spite of my disguise. Within a day, I found it a risk to go on the streets, and I knew it would be impossible to leave Marsport. Every man would be inspected thoroughly, to make sure he was not Blake Harrison. No chance—except one."

Blake Harrison nodded limply. "To stop the police from looking for you, by having yourself apprehended. So—you fashioned me in your own likeness, and I took the rap."

The other Blake Harrison nodded.

"I am a scientist," he said offhandedly, with a certain smugness. "If I hadn't been, I couldn't have kept away from the law for this long. For a month, I brought in the supplies to make a system of machines which I had started on several years ago, but not quite completed.

"Finding it necessary to escape, necessity became the mother of invention. I completed my apparatus—doubtless you saw it," he said with a sneer. "Well, it's nothing if not complex. I could go into a lot of detail, probably, and tell you how to build one yourself—but why?

"In a few minutes you'll be as much without life as the basic electrons you were created from." He laughed gently, evilly. "Still, I can say this much—a stencil duplicates with the proper use of instruments and inks.

"A human being can be a stencil himself, and can be duplicated with the proper use of forces. I 'stenciled' you, electron by electron, molecule by molecule."*

He leaned forward, his eyes glinting with sardonic amusement.

"That coffin-like machine in there was your birthplace, and I was the stencil. With one exception, you were born with a fully developed body. The exception is that you were born with a virgin brain—with a baby's brain. And with the proper use of forces, I stenciled your whole life, your whole list of past experiences, down to the smallest detail, on your brain.

"Your name was Blake Harrison. You were the rich son of a steel mill king. Your father was big, bluff, a stern business man. Your mother was a sweet, wonderful woman whom you worshiped. Your grades in school were fair. Your life was the normal life of a rich man's son.

"You left Harvard with honors. You came to Mars, slightly wearied by the long trip. You decided to go on a bender, see what Martian night life was like. You were drinking Martian ale by the gallon—" He paused to let his cruel words sink in.

Blake Harrison was running with the sweat of agony, of revolt for himself.

"Don't," he said, shuddering. "You might tell me one more thing, though—and then go ahead and kill me! I don't want to live anyway. I'm not human. I couldn't stand it. Why did you go to all the trouble—and it must have been trouble—to keep *yourself* out of my brain?"

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*It is well known that atoms are grouped in very definite patterns, and that the electrons and protons of an atom are quite different in construction, with each element. Also that molecules are made up of atoms grouped in certain ways, which make up certain compounds. Therefore, our bodies are a maze of complicated pattern-structures, which could be theoretically duplicated and copied, were a means of such duplication mechanically and chemically devised.—Ed.

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"FOOL!" the pirate sneered. "Then there would have been two Blake Harrisons who had to get out of Marsport."

"But you could have let one get captured, offering freedom to the other."

"Great God!" the pirate breathed. "I gave you less brain-power than I thought! If one Blake Harrison escaped, it would simply mean that another would go to prison for life. And that one would be—me! It would be *me* even if it was the man that I created . . .

"Let that be the end of it!" he suddenly snapped, tossing his head. "This plan failed. Why I explained to you I don't know—I waste time. Another Blake Harrison must be created, identical enough with yourself so that the police think they have recaptured you. But *that* Blake Harrison will not know what you know."

The pirate rose with a snaky motion, stood over the bound man. He raised the Graydon pistol slowly.

Blake Harrison watched him dully, hopelessly. He was bitter now, bitter as no one man had ever been. It seemed incredible. He could recall his mother's face, her every characteristic with a clarity that was real, that made her real. Surely, she, and all the things he *remembered* happening to him, really existed. He groaned, tossing his head as a fever came to his mind.

He watched the real Blake Harrison's finger tightening on the trigger. Slowly—too slowly.

"Shoot!" he croaked. "For God's sake—shoot!"

The pirate's eyes were satanic as he slowly pulled in the trigger that would send a hot tube of intense flame burning through his captive's heart. He was taking his time, for his cruelty was no legend in the minds of men, but fact. Another second—and total oblivion!

The innocent Blake Harrison closed his eyes, glad, glad that nothing could save him now. But his eyes snapped open again, looked instinctively through the room's window. He saw a face, the face of a man garbed in the uniform of the port police. The fact abruptly disappeared. Harrison felt a cold wave of fear.

He yelled, "Shoot, you fool! Before it's too late!"

But it *was* too late. The door burst open, and two of the port police stood there, befuddled for an instant, and then alive with terrifying action. Harrison groaned abjectly, shuddering.

Blake Harrison, the pirate, spun with a wild curse, hurling himself backward, even as he fired blinding flame. His first charge was wide. He had no time for a second, for the arm that held the flame pistol was literally burnt off at the shoulder by the men in the doorway.

Blake Harrison, the innocent, saw that, sobbed at the irony of the fate that had robbed him of the death he wanted. Then he fainted dead away, as the police officers came charging into the room to take their screaming prisoner.

BLAKE HARRISON—the unreal—could not even bring himself to grin as he stood before a bandaged and painfully itching chief of police. Harrison's lips were turned down, and his eyes were sullen, lethargic.

THE chief, surreptitiously rubbing his thigh, grinned crookedly.

"Well, Harrison, we've heard the other Harrison's story—so that let's you out. You're a free man, and we've got the real criminal. And you've got yourself to thank for it. You know—the four words you wrote on the wall above Harrison's place.

"*Poison ivy—ha, ha!* Any cop who saw that, and who had heard about the

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episode in the jail, would have been attracted by that tip-off. Now nobody else but you could have known about it—we'd hardly tell anybody else about it, would we?" he said wryly, still scratching persistently.

"I've got myself to *blame* for it," Blake said suddenly. "I wanted to die. Do you think I can go on living, knowing what I am?" he added with a burst of bitterness.

The chief walked around his desk, looking concerned. He grasped Harrison's arm.

"Yes, what are you?" he said softly. "I said you were a *free man.* How that pirate Harrison ever did it, I don't know, and he'll never tell us. But he supplied *you* with all the experiences, all the education, all the background, all the memories of a normal person.

"True, your mother and father and brother and all your friends are dead—to you—but it should help your grief to know they never existed at all. I'm an orphan, but I don't think I'm a monster."

He scratched uneasily. He looked then straight into Blake Harrison's eyes, smiling.

"Do you see what I mean, boy?"

A startled light was dawning on the youngster's face.

"I think I do," he breathed. His breath came fast. "Even though I was created—all human beings are created. When they reach my age, they have the same average memories—it's no different."

His chest swelled, and the corners of his mouth drew up. The chief smiled in satisfaction.

"Good boy."

He walked behind his desk again.

"One more thing." The chief smiled broadly and held out a slip of paper.

Harrison took it.

"A check," he gasped. "A—a hundred thousand dollars?"

"Right. Blake Harrison had a price on his head. That should be enough to give you a start in life." He grinned and then sobered. Absently he scratched.

"That poison ivy," the chief rumbled. "It was a good idea—but smoke?" He looked incredulous.

"Sure," Blake Harrison smiled. "The other Harrison included that in my education. Burning poison ivy carries the poison in its smoke. It affects the skin in just the same way."

"But this worked *fast!*" the chief objected.

"Why not? Martian poison ivy is ten times as virulent as that on Earth, because the conditions are more hostile. Well—" he paused—"I guess that about winds it up."

"But you? Why didn't you get it?" the chief demanded. "You handled the weed itself, you were in the smoke."

"Because," said Harrison, his eyes twinkling, "I happen to be immune. I'm—synthetic."

The chief nodded forlornly. "Yeah, I figured as much, you lucky dog!" He wriggled vigorously on his swivel chair, flushing embarrassedly when he saw Blake Harrison watching him with the makings of a grin.

PRESENTLY, "What are your plans now?"

Blake Harrison met his eyes steadily, a confident, happy light growing in his own.

"Back to Earth," he said softly. "Back to the planet I know as well as if I'd actually spent the greater part of my life there. I may be machine-made, but I'm a member of the human race, and I can catch experiences with the best of 'em!"

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STRATOSPHERE TRAVEL

Man's dream of flying was perhaps the strongest longing he has ever had. It has come true, but where will it end? Is the stratosphere the answer?

NOT SO long ago a young diver from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, descended into Lake Michigan off Port Washington to a depth of over four hundred feet in a special diving suit of his own invention.

Those who saw this suit were amazed at it, so wonderfully was it constructed to withstand the tremendous pressures of the depths to which it was subjected. Those of us who have never been deeper than the bottom of the old swimming pool can't imagine the extent of the pressure so far beneath the surface; but you can be sure it requires such a suit to combat it.

But what about the opposite extreme, the heights of the stratosphere? Today, man is flying in ships as high as six miles and more, to do battle. And he has discovered that a special suit is required, both to provide oxygen and to protect against the cold. Another factor, not yet so important, but still noticeable, is pressure — for pressure decreases with height, just as it increases with depth. And if man is to go higher, it will become an important problem, and one which must be solved.

When artist Julian S. Krupa pictured this rocket-propelled, gravity-negative stratosphere flying suit, he solved his problem just as Noll did off Port Washington; he built a metal suit, pressure-resistant, air-conditioned, heat-proofed, and streamlined.

Let us consider the problems that must be attacked in constructing such an individual flying mechanism as this.

Our intention is to fly along at a height of 60 miles or more. We want to travel through an area that is free of storm, as calm and motionless as space itself. So we must protect against little or no pressure, to maintain our own body pressure of 16 pounds per square inch; we must protect against extreme cold perhaps as low as 100° below zero, Fahrenheit; we must also protect, scientists suspect now, against the possibility of a belt where the temperature goes up, rather than down—where it may be hot enough to melt lead!

Thus, we see, we must have a metal suit, constructed with a vacuum jacket between layers, and lined with both heat and cold resisting minerals. We must have a supply of heating and cooling elements which will maintain a constant temperature inside the suit. We must have a moisture regulator which will prevent excessive condensation, or excessive vaporizing. And we must have a unit which will eliminate carbon dioxide from our breathing.

All of this will be very heavy. So, we must have a gravity-nullifying unit, an electrical reversal of the power of gravity, which can be controlled to a degree, so that we may make our weight as little or as much as we desire.

As we travel, we must have radio both for communication, and for direction. We will follow a beam, since we will be able to judge distance and direction only by such means. The earth, viewed from the stratosphere, is very deceptive. We will not be high enough to discern continental outlines, and too high to discern landmarks. Even cities will be invisible. We will not be able to tell the difference between land and water, nor see the difference between plains and mountains.

Our rocket power will consist of liquid hydrogen, or helium. We can carry vast quantities of this in an insulated drum, which is built into the suit. Changed into gas by a heating element, directly in the rocket chambers, it will be violently expelled so as to propel us at any speed we desire. And with the aid of our directional fins, we will hurtle along at seven hundred miles an hour!

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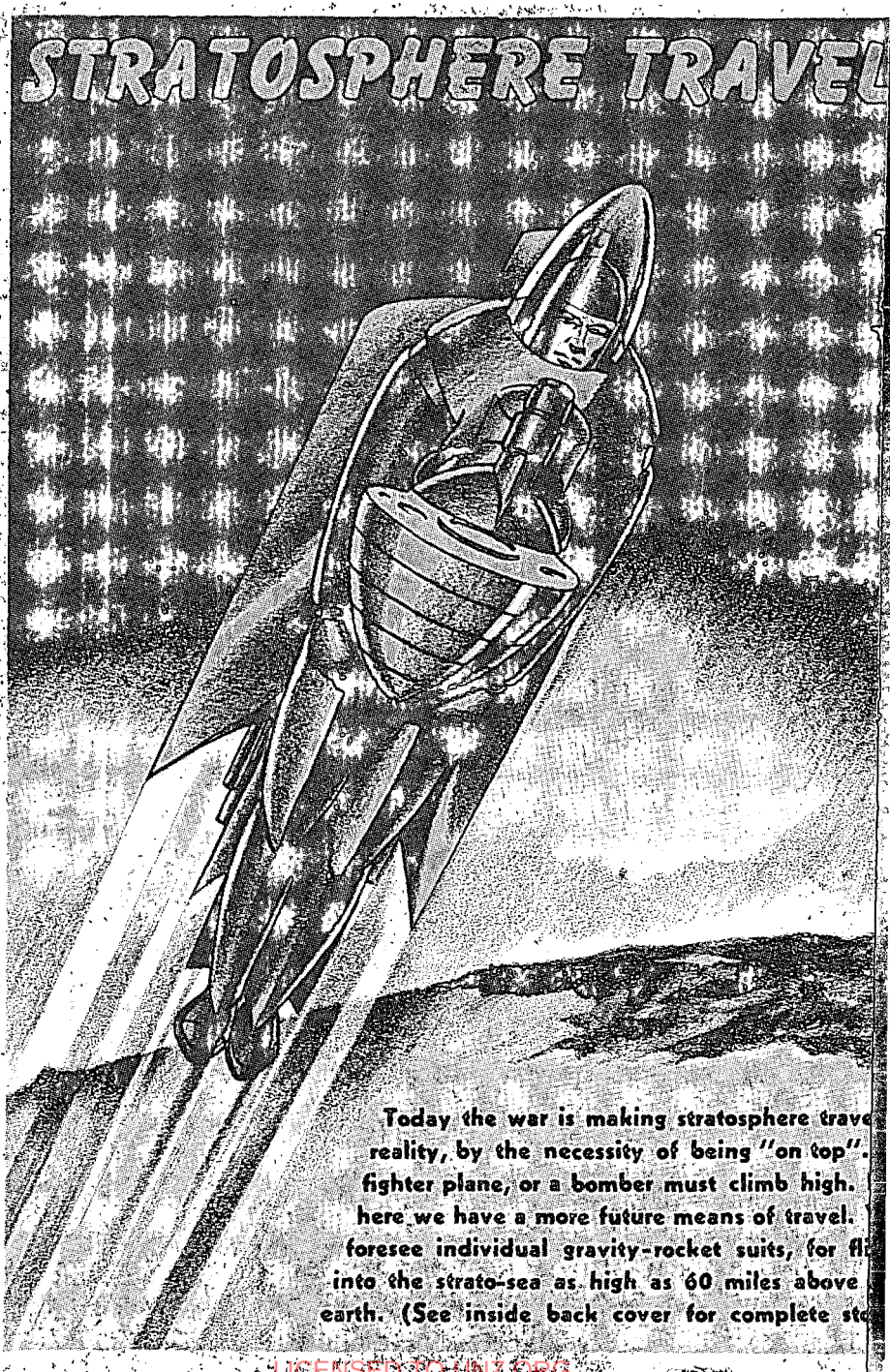
STRATOSPHERE TRAVEL



Today the war is making stratosphere trave
reality, by the necessity of being "on top".
fighter plane, or a bomber must climb high.
here we have a more future means of travel.
foresee individual gravity-rocket suits, for fl
into the strato-sea as high as 60 miles above
earth. (See inside back cover for complete st

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